

Claiming and Making Muslim Worlds: Religion and Society in the Context of the Global

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Claiming and Making Muslim Worlds

ZMO-Studien



Studien des Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient

Herausgegeben von
Ulrike Freitag

Band 40

Claiming and Making Muslim Worlds

Religion and Society in the Context of the Global

Edited by
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and Ulrike Freitag

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Books carry the names of their editors and authors. This book being the culmination of Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient's research programme from 2008 to 2019, the names in this book only reflect some of the outcomes. Behind them were years of animated academic debate, intense research and multiple cooperations. Consequently, this volume is a collective effort by ZMO colleagues as well as the academic contributors to the conference from which it emerged.

Beyond the academic contributors, not all of whom are represented in this volume, there was a dedicated group of people without whom this book might never have been completed. We are particularly grateful to Hannah Newbury for her careful language editing. Nele Brunner and Berenice Brüggemann were indispensable when it came to standardising the different styles of citation. We are very grateful to Dr. Sophie Wagenhofer for her support at De Gruyter. However, without Svenja Becherer's dedicated support, effective oversight and organisational talent, this book would perhaps never have seen the light of day. We thank the Federal Ministry for Education and Research for the funding of the Research Programme and gratefully acknowledge a grant by the Leibniz-Association supporting the open access publication.

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Jeanine Dağyeli, Ulrike Freitag, Claudia Ghrawi
Claiming and Making Muslim Worlds

Introduction

The contributions to this volume examine different ways in which Muslims have laid claim to, and shaped their worlds in the 20th and 21st centuries. While the negotiation of identities and the ordering and reordering of societies is a common process, why do we choose ‘Muslims’ as a ‘field’ of enquiry? Would we ask similar questions about Christians or Buddhists?¹

Thus, the very choice of the field of research raises a number of fundamental questions which arose in the very particular historical context of the first two decades of the 21st century, when the devastating and highly symbolic attacks on the World Trade Centre by the Islamist organisation al-Qa’ida in September 2001 triggered what was termed the ‘Global War on Terror’. Of course, the identification of Muslims as the Christian (and Western) ‘Other’ goes back almost to the inception of Islam. The long history of mutual relations and perceptions underwent many permutations, which need not be rehearsed here. Suffice it to say that the Age of Imperialism, where this book takes its starting point, coincided with an often violent reconfiguration of these relations. While the 20th century itself witnessed multiple shifts, which we reflect on below, at the time of planning the research on which the book is based, mutual perceptions had taken another distinct turn for the worse. Since the end of the Cold War, some political scientists and area studies specialists have become adherents of a school of thought that promotes the notion of a ‘Clash of Civilizations’.² With the

1 “We” refers primarily to the editors of this volume and reflects, more generally, the orientation of the ZMO research programme between 2008 and 2019. We are grateful for the feedback received from many colleagues at ZMO, and would like to specifically acknowledge the comments of Kai Kresse and Sarah Jurkiewicz.

2 The classical post-Cold War shift occurred with Samuel Huntington’s thesis of the ‘Clash of Civilizations’, which was presented as a lecture in 1992, published as an article in *Foreign Affairs* (72;3, 22–49) in 1993, and appeared as a book entitled *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster) in 1996. The term is said to have been derived from Bernard Lewis’s 1990 essay “The Roots of Muslim Rage”. Other prominent authors who contributed to this trend are Bassam Tibi (*Krieg der Zivilisationen: Politik und Religion zwischen Vernunft und Fundamentalismus*, Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe 1995) and Martin

transformation of the Afghan Jihad against the Soviet Union into an insurgency aimed at Western regimes and their allies, the emergence of al-Qa'ida, and the attack on the World Trade Centre, being identified as 'Muslim' has become highly problematic in Western contexts. At the same time, and partly sparked by these developments, but also partly in response to internal dynamics, debates among Muslims about identity and what it means to be a 'proper Muslim' also gained traction, often in ways that mirrored the encounter with the non-Muslim 'Other'.

What gets lost in such politically volatile contexts are the self-attributions, conceptualisations, and practices by which ordinary people constantly envision, create, and remake their lifeworlds. Twinning the discursive potential of 'claiming' and 'making', we wanted to restore a voice to the myriad ways in which 'Muslimness' is manifested, while at the same time unmuting marginal voices that are excluded from the hegemonic discourse within Muslim communities. Such internal differences, constitutive to Shahab Ahmad's approach to Islam, are evidenced, for example, in the chapters by Haniffa or Frede.³ While this is one important reason for this book to highlight multiple Muslim 'worlds' rather than claiming the unity of one 'world of Islam', another is the observation that factors other than Islam can be just as constitutive for local perspectives, as shown in the chapter by Scheele.

So, how are plural Muslim lifeworlds and conceptual world-making interwoven? And how are these imbricated with etic group concepts such as that of the *umma*, the community of believers? The chapters of this book provide answers which are specific to certain regions, places and times. This is very much linked to the epistemological stance uniting the authors of this volume regarding the regions and people they study: While most subjects appearing in these studies profess Islam or are classified as Muslims, this does not per se explain much about their lives. Instead, we ask how people who either declare themselves to be Muslims or who are, in specific contexts, labelled as such by non-Muslims, understand and use or do not use Islam in their daily lives and in different contexts.⁴ We also ask how states and individuals in Muslim majority and minority contexts actively refer to Islam in a global setting where 'Islam' – or rather particular variants thereof – has become synonymous with fanaticism, and worse, for many non-Muslim governments since the end of the Cold War?

Kramer (*Ivory Towers on Sand: The failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*, Washington: The Washington Institute 2001).

³ The plurality of Islam is one of the main topics of Ahmad 2016 and McBrien 2017.

⁴ Otayek and Soares 2007.

This negative equation is quite irrespective of earlier Western support for jihadists when it seemed expedient, as in the case of the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s.⁵ Worse, still, current Western support is often made conditional on cooperation in the ‘fight against terrorism’, which, as shown in the chapter by Frede in this book, has further fuelled contestations about ‘moderate Islam’, thereby at times suppressing other urgent debates about good governance.⁶ In this complex setting it is essential to pay minute attention to who uses which labels, and in which contexts they become relevant. Because of this, we insist on speaking of plural worlds rather than of one ‘world of Islam’. The importance of Islam needs to be explained in each and every case, notably as we are dealing with people and contexts that are quite far apart in time and space.

In this introduction we will further explore some of the conceptual questions just indicated. We begin with a brief discussion of how we understand and approach Islam. Furthermore, we engage with the question of different scales in the study of Muslim worlds, and then consider some of the theoretical and methodological challenges involved in this endeavour. Finally, we highlight the sections and topics on which this volume focusses. The selection of case studies combines historical, anthropological, political, and literary perspectives. In doing so, this volume reflects a long-standing multi- and interdisciplinary engagement with translocal and globalising practices in the overwhelmingly Muslim societies of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East at Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) and its scholarly context. The contributions to this volume thus represent a selection of papers presented at a conference held at ZMO in early April 2019 entitled “Claiming and Making Muslim Worlds: Across and Between the Global and the Local”. The volume can be considered one of the major outcomes of the ZMO research programme between 2009 and 2018, entitled “Muslim Worlds – World of Islam? Tracing Connections, Practices and Crises of the Global in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East”.⁷

⁵ Mitchell 2002, Lansford 2003, especially chapter 4.

⁶ Fisher and Anderson 2015. We thank Frédéric Madore for suggesting this reference.

⁷ This research programme was generously funded by Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung. For more information on the programme, see: https://archiv.zmo.de/forschung/projekte_2008_2013/Forschungsprogramm%2007-09-07.pdf. An overview of the projects conducted within this framework can be found here: https://archiv.zmo.de/forschung/index_e.html.

Studying Islam

The notion of Muslim worlds is arguably a construct that warrants some explanation. Islam is but one, and oftentimes not even the most evident, category with which people identify or from which they draw their motivations. Nevertheless, even where Islam is explicitly evoked by the actors themselves, it often serves as a unifying device. It is at such junctures of explicit reference that we speak of Muslim worlds, as we could, in similar instances, speak of Christian, Buddhist, or other worlds. At the same time, Islam can serve as a smokescreen that masks divisions and contradictions within societies. The complex nature of human engagement and interaction rarely, if ever, allows for a labelling under one single signifier such as religion. What this volume offers is the study of a multifaceted Islam and its interrelatedness with other aspects of cultural and politic life, by demonstrating multiple ways of being Muslim and relating to one's own 'Muslimness' and to that of others.

The contributors to this volume start from an empirical observation, namely the existence of people professing Islam and forming the vast majority population in much of the Middle East, as well as large parts of Africa and Asia, in addition to larger or smaller minority populations elsewhere. 'Muslim worlds' nevertheless remains a complicated heuristic category in terms of common assumptions, debates about Islam and religion, as well as questions regarding notions and definitions of 'worlds'.⁸ The spread of Islam from the first hijri century (7th century C.E.) has certainly created a common mould that has been termed 'Islamicate World' by Marshall Hodgson, a term that accepts Islam as a holistic complex which shaped cultural and social thoughts and practices, irrespective of individual religious identities within this complex.⁹ It is equally certain that within this very general mould, a multitude of variations have emerged. Rather than following Hodgson's 'World', however, we opt for the plural and thereby not only emphasise the internal differentiation, but also aim to counteract an inherent Arabocentric impetus as well as an essentialising generic perception and presentation.

Ever since the rise of a more distinctive notion of 'religion' in the late 19th century European tradition, the question of how to fit 'Islam' into that category has troubled scholars. Bergunder argues that this results from the fact that even

⁸ For a more extensive discussion of these issues see Freitag 2013 and the commentary by Meyer 2014.

⁹ Hodgson 1977, 56–60.

within the discipline of Religious Studies, the concept has hardly been subjected to rigorous reflection, resulting instead and implicitly from the European experience of secularisation, for which religion became the ‘Other’. This was enhanced by the encounter with other systems of meaning-making in the 19th century.¹⁰ The obvious question is how Islam fit such a model arising from a specifically European experience? Western scholarship, some of which Tayob engages with in the final chapter of this book, often reflected this difficulty.

A number of attempts have been made to disentangle the resulting conceptual problems. To give but two examples: Talal Asad – critical of the European tradition but remaining quite close to the concept of religion – has famously framed Islam as a “discursive tradition” in order to account for quite diverging interpretations of doctrine and practices in different regions and periods.¹¹ Shahab Ahmad’s recent approach is considerably wider: he defines Islam as “meaning-making for the self in terms of hermeneutical engagement with Revelation to Muhammad”.¹² Such “meaning-making” can lead to hugely varying and at times contradictory understandings and actions, which are, in Ahmad’s reading, fully in line with ‘Islam’. Significantly, his emphasis on the “Balkans-to-Bengal complex” moves away from an Arabocentric view of Islam, even if it does not include sub-Saharan and Southeast Asian Muslims (and self-consciously marginalises Islam in the Arab lands).¹³

Ahmad’s inclusive notion is an explicit answer to, and criticism of, a concept of ‘religion’ that implies a specific conceptual divide between a ‘religious’ and a ‘secular’ sphere.¹⁴ While some authors, such as Tayob, have been striving to reform or decolonise the study of religious studies in order to define a more comprehensive and thus globally comparative applicable field of study – an effort also reflected in his chapter in this volume – others, such as Schulze, have suggested to remove “the classical cultural terminology (...) from our scholarly toolbox”.¹⁵

Varisco has suggested that there “is so much debate about the methodological problems in past sociological models of religion that borrowing contested terms may simply beg the theoretical questions”.¹⁶ However, it is important to

10 Bergunder 2011, for some of the basic discussions Segal 2016, c.f. Masuzawa 2005, 18f and *passim*.

11 Asad 2009 [1986], 10ff.

12 Ahmad 2016, 405.

13 *Ibid.*, 73–85.

14 *Ibid.*, 176–245.

15 Schulze 1998, 197, Tayob 2018.

16 Varisco 2005, 138.

reflect on the prevalent and rather narrow definitions of religion in order to understand that neither does Islam neatly fit into what might be intuitively understood to be ‘religion’, nor is such a notion of ‘religion’ at present a particularly helpful category. The aim of this volume is not to define Islam or who is a Muslim.¹⁷ Rather than assuming the existence of Muslim worlds, or indeed considering Islam as the primary signifier for the identity of Muslims, we investigate, on the basis of specific cases and situations in different parts of the world, when, and in which contexts Islam is being invoked, used, or contested.¹⁸

World claiming and making – Islam and the everyday

‘Claiming’ and ‘making’ can thus be read as two approaches towards conceptualisations of Muslim worlds that emphasise ‘living Islam’ (Marsden 2005) and Muslim subjectivities rather than normative agendas, state institutions, and political elites. The terms also highlight the processual character of engaging questions of identity and memory politics without considering Muslims as primarily, if not exclusively, determined by their religion and its canonical sources.

Some chapters in this book trace and explore mundane practices which are claimed to be ‘Islamic’ or are linked to Islam. They consider how these practices become integrated into the lives of the respective actors and activities at all levels between the local and the global. This is one important aspect of the chapters by Haniffa and Stephan-Emmrich. We are further curious to better understand how meanings of ‘Islam’ circulate, including the practical communicative and technological infrastructures of circulation. Do ideas change or are adapted when they are moved to another context or presented in a different form? Prominent examples are the evolution of ‘Islamic Socialism’ by the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and Egypt in the late 1950s, the development of a Third Worldist ‘Progressive Islam’ in contexts as diverse as Egypt and Malaysia, and some of the Islamic leftist trends calling for the Iranian Revolution.¹⁹ Likewise, and more recently, themes like ‘Islamic environmentalism’, animal rights, ‘Islamic feminism’, or assisted reproductive technologies have garnered atten-

¹⁷ Schielke 2010, Kresse 2013, 77f.

¹⁸ Schielke and Debevec 2012, 1–12, Soares and Osella 2010, 12.

¹⁹ Abaza 1998; Abrahamian 1989, 105–25, Bakhtiari 1989.

tion, sparked popular and academic debates, and brought activists to the streets.²⁰

Beyond individual actors, political movements and states have, in different ways, either drawn on Islam (or Islamically inflected rhetoric) or defined their position in explicit response to decidedly Islamic positions. Thus, controversies can occur both at the level of the confrontation of (non-Muslim) states with Muslim minorities, as in the case of Sri Lanka, discussed by Haniffa, but also when it comes to (Muslim) statist attempts to define an authoritative version of Islam against competing interpretations, as in the case of Mauretania, discussed by Frede. The nation-state, which became a standard political entity during the first half of the 20th century, is increasingly confronted with competing political models in an Islamic garb. One such example is the recent caliphate declared by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in 2014. Even where Islam is evoked, regional affiliations can provide powerful motivations to challenge the state, as shown in the chapters by Scheele and Sounaye. Such influences of ‘Muslim politics’ challenge both relations between states and dynamics within states.²¹ Casini’s chapter illustrates how the changing notions of Muslimness and political Islam are reflected in Arabic novels in Egypt and Kuwait, while El Guabli demonstrates their explicit exclusion in the Moroccan process of national reconciliation. As is evident from these examples, the individual ‘worlds’ invoked can be of quite different scales, and the relationship between different localities can be of very different orders, which raises the question of how we understand and approach such ‘worlds’.

Muslim worlds: Localities, spaces, scales, and temporalities

If we speak of ‘Muslim worlds’ in the plural, this recognises the necessary attention to historical and spatial contexts instead of assuming some uniform kind of ‘globality’.²² Arguably, the nature of this plurality has itself changed and trans-

²⁰ Hancock 2018, Foltz 2000, 2005, Islam and Islam 2015, Badran 2005, Cooke 2001, Inhorn 2011, Inhorn and Tremayne 2012.

²¹ Hoeber Rudolph, 2008, Mandaville 2007, 4.

²² Freitag and von Oppen 2010, 13–16. For the emergence of the ideas, c.f. Aydin 2017. A living example is the title of the leading German periodical of Middle Eastern Studies, *Die Welt des Islams* (The [sic!] World of Islam) even if the content of the journal reflects more plurality than the (rather old) title suggests.

formed in the context of post-modernist pluralisation and relativism, as Schulze has argued with special reference to contemporary Islamist groups.²³ As Bamyeh asserts, Islam oftentimes forms more of a “reserve discourse” which “remains available when everything else fails”, even if such Islamic discourses have become more present since the late 1960s for a variety of reasons.²⁴

Beyond the understanding of what might be considered theological or intellectual positions and debates, and of how Islam is integrated into the everyday, we are interested in the actual interactions of Muslims. We argue that – beyond the largely theoretical notion of one community of believers (*umma*), enacted most prominently during the annual pilgrimage (*hajj*) – Muslims live in different geographic, political, linguistic etc. contexts. These they connect at specific moments in specific ways. They thus contribute to and are influenced by multiple processes of translocal (ex)changes, which are commonly termed ‘globalisation’, and which are here understood to consist of a multitude of intersecting, competing, and multi-directional processes. In addition to the increasing economic (inter)dependence, the frequency and depth of international exchanges on all levels has palpably intensified since the latter half of the 18th century, and received the latest boost through new communication technologies.²⁵ Such exchanges can be facilitated, but in no way naturalised by the common idiom of Islam.²⁶ This, then, creates historically specific translocal and, nowadays, transnational Muslim spaces or worlds. These often evoke specific tensions or questions between different ways of being Muslim, as emerges, in different ways, in the contributions by Mato-Bouzas, Scheele, Haniffa, and Stephan-Emmrich. Thus, we argue that Muslim worlds on this more spatial level, too, need to be identified and historically situated, rather than considered a permanent, objectifiable entity.²⁷ Thus, any attempts at mapping them to better understand the “erasing and redrawing [of] boundaries” in globalising processes will need to take this historicity into account.²⁸

In an earlier work concerned with conceptualising translocality, Freitag and van Oppen engaged particularly with global history and emphasised the differences between the more nuanced approach of translocality and much of global history writing and globalisation studies. Used descriptively, translocality de-

²³ Schulze 1998.

²⁴ Bamyeh 2019, 218, see also Ahmad 2019.

²⁵ Bayly 2004, Osterhammel 2009, 1010–55, Mandaville 2007, 322–27.

²⁶ For a telling anecdote illustrating this point, see Ahmed 2016, 4,

²⁷ On the political genealogy of the notion of “one Muslim world” in the West, see Aydin 2017.

²⁸ Such mapping is suggested by Vásques and Marquardt 2006, 318.

notes “the sum of phenomena which result from a multitude of circulations and transfers”.²⁹ As a research perspective, translocality aims at highlighting the diverse and at times contradictory outcomes of the interactions and movements of people, goods, ideas, and symbols. It calls for attention to the spatial, social and temporal ruptures, limitations, and exclusions as much as to the described connections and entanglements. This offers a very differentiated way of looking at globalisation phenomena, recognising their limitations, conditions as well as the teleological tendencies often inherent in globalisation discourses.³⁰ Translocality also allows for very different scales of engagement, while terms like ‘transnational history’ already naturalise the (Western model of the) nation state as a crucial referent.³¹ While we of course recognise the current salience of this state model, as is evident especially from section two of this book, we aim at historicising it, thereby recognising it as a historically recent (and not teleologically predetermined) development.³² Methodologically, the study of translocality benefitted particularly from the suggestions made by Werner and Zimmermann regarding the need to bring together different archives and scales of entanglement in what they have called ‘histoire croisée’.³³ This resembles in many ways anthropological approaches to multi-sited fieldwork which have called for observing the processual relations between places instead of concentrating on a single, preferably marginal, locality.³⁴ Finally, the study of translocality sharpens the need for a reflexive approach.

In history, the conversation about how to bring together global and micro-history – which in turn has many points of contact with historical anthropology – has been particularly fruitful.³⁵ There are many different ways of how micro- and global history can be brought into conversation, for example by juxtaposing contemporaneous (micro)stories from different settings or by tracing translocal connectivities.³⁶ The shift in “conceptual topology”³⁷ has taken many directions since, from travelling with labour migrants, pilgrims, pastoral-

²⁹ Freitag and von Oppen 2010, 5.

³⁰ Ibid., 5–16.

³¹ E.g. Struck, Ferris, and Revel 2011.

³² For a useful sociological perspective on a different concepts of statehood, see Schlichte 2018, particularly 49–52. Herren’s (2018) insistence on the multiple and interweaving (or “networked”) layers of statehood at the international scale is also important.

³³ Werner and Zimmermann 2006.

³⁴ Marcus 1995, Coleman and Hellermann 2011.

³⁵ See the contributions in *Past & Present* 242, Supplement 14, November 2019.

³⁶ For two different approaches e.g. Zemon-Davis 2011, c.f. Ghobrial 2019, 15f.

³⁷ Coleman and Hellermann 2011, 2.

ists, and heritage tourists to tracing the biographies of translocal families or the flow of concepts, fashions, and consumer goods.³⁸ In that sense, it has widened the scale and at the same time redirected the focus of interest. It also engendered a conceptual shift towards an approach which is focussed on close collaboration between researchers and interlocutors who at times become co-researchers. The authors in this volume differ not only in their disciplinary approaches but also in the focus and scale of their engagement, which is taken up in a more empirical manner in the first section of this book.³⁹

One major insight of Global History, at least in its more recent forms, has been the critique of nation-centred historiography and of Eurocentrism in the context of globalising experiences.⁴⁰ The universalist agenda of global history has encountered an interesting counterforce: interest in its research agenda is unevenly spread, as Ghobrial has argued with reference to Arab historians, who are still preoccupied with the writing of national(ist) historiographies. He is also critical of a pitfall of a globalist agenda which might neglect local events, contexts, and sources in its drive to widen geographical units.⁴¹ While one would probably need to somewhat nuance Ghobrial's concern in light of new approaches to global history, his empirical finding about a regionally very disparate interest in global history remains valid. It would be interesting to further investigate to what extent the interest in global scales in history and translocal anthropology can be correlated with the stakes that different countries and regions have in the current wave of political and economic globalisation.

An interest in connectivities and entanglements must, of course, be sensitive to inequalities and hierarchies within and without the relevant 'worlds' or units of observation.⁴² This means that it might reveal more layers of differential power and influence than the standard Saidian critique of Orientalist writing would suggest. It is probably more appropriate to think of

globalization as a set of contradictory bundles of social and discursive practices of hegemony, rather than a uniform and ubiquitous process that simultaneously haunts the whole world. Globalizations, in the plural, then include top-down projects and processes

³⁸ See, for example, Schramm 2020, Stephan-Emmrich and Schröder 2018, the contributions in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 45;3, 2019, Schielke 2020.

³⁹ De Vito 2019.

⁴⁰ Conrad 2016, 1–6; 162–84, for a broader definition of global history *ibid.* 62–89.

⁴¹ Ghobrial 2019, 9f. This means by no way that he would subscribe to views that Global history is “a ruse of the mighty and powerful”, Conrad 2016, 189, but simply that he and others are pointing to other priorities in history writing.

⁴² Conrad and Eckert 2007, 23–24.

put forward by multi-located and conflicting elites, as much as multiple ‘counter-global networks’ emerging from below.⁴³

How, the contributors to this volume ask, do Muslims shape translocal spaces with or without religious connotations, how do they envisage Islam in political contexts, and how do they react to, adopt, or appropriate new internationalising norms and ideas in different contexts? They thus take the discursive and pragmatic agency embedded in the term Muslim worlds, i.e. the ways and potentialities of diverse world-making, as an angle of analysis, rather than the homogenising notion of an ‘Islamic world’ that centres on religion at the expense of all other aspects of life.⁴⁴

This becomes clear, for example, in the very different contexts of the chapters by Kempen, Frede, Haniffa, Scheele, and Sounaye. They show in an exemplary way how international power differentials, cultural and religious labels, but also different locations of economic and political power within and beyond states shape the relevant Muslim ‘worlds’. At the same time, they also highlight that we cannot conceive of such Muslim ‘worlds’ without taking into account what happens beyond their Islamically connoted horizon, however small or large the cases are. This holds true whether we are talking about very small and localised case studies, or larger transnational contexts.⁴⁵

Although not thematised in this volume, it is important to realise that the observation that Muslim ‘worlds’ can never be considered in isolation also holds true in the inverse sense, i.e. what occurs in Muslim ‘worlds’ also impacts those who would not consider themselves to belong to this realm. This is as true for religious actors taking cues from one another in their competition for audiences as it is for political relations or for definitions of the self and the ‘Other’.⁴⁶ It should be clear by now that ‘Muslim worlds’ are, in such a scenario, a heuristic device, rather than referring to objective and static entities. They are designed by the theoretical interest of the observer, not by some absolute reality.⁴⁷

⁴³ De Vito 2019, 370.

⁴⁴ For a deeper discussion of this see Schielke 2010.

⁴⁵ De Vries 2019, 24.

⁴⁶ Ibrahim 2017, McBrien 2017, Green 2011, Bunt 2018.

⁴⁷ On this see Schmidt-Wellenburg, 2020 and Kauppi 2020, 46–47.

Towards a non-hegemonic approach

By foregrounding local perspectives and interpretations, this volume goes against the grain of predominant conceptual, historical, and geographical research repertoires that assume the centrality of the global North in the historical process since the 19th century, which is often described as ‘globalisation’. Its authors take local perspectives and conceptualisations seriously, rather than assuming a singular and homogenous Muslim world.⁴⁸

So how can we speak about Muslim worlds? Ever since the call for ‘provincialising Europe’, i.e. for considering the European experience as one among many strands of human experience and thus for no longer considering European experiences and concepts as paradigmatic, this question has gained in acuteness. This was not merely a recognition of the impact of colonialism but, at a much more profound level, deeply linked to fundamental questions regarding the production of knowledge about non-Western societies (and ultimately, about knowledge production in general) within a global postcolonial scenario.⁴⁹ This begins with the ways in which not only notions of the religious and the secular, but whole academic disciplines, and particularly those dealing with non-Western and non-Christian societies, were formed. In the process of ordering scholarly disciplines in Western academia in the 19th and early 20th centuries, anthropology was given the task to deal with the sociology of societies deemed to be lacking literate traditions, while Oriental Studies dealt with literate non-Western societies, and sociology with Western societies.⁵⁰ These disciplines produced the major approaches and concepts which are still in use to describe and analyse societies today. This raises fundamental philosophical and political questions about the adequacy of Western concepts for non-Western societies, or about the context in which concepts coined for non-Western societies were developed, resulting in questions about their adequacy and concerns about hegemony.

The multiple inequalities between and within different knowledge systems, from status and recognition to available means for research and language, place

⁴⁸ See some of the points in more detail in Freitag 2013.

⁴⁹ See Chakrabarty 2000.

⁵⁰ Masuzawa 2005, 19 and Mignolo 2009, 171, and for International Relations Derichs 2017, 14f. For the debate about history, see in particular Chakrabarty 2000, but also the critical challenges to his position, e.g. by Argyrou 2001, Kaiwar 2014, notably 156–222, and 301–75, respectively.

very real obstacles to meaningful engagement on an equal footing.⁵¹ Essentialising categories stand in the way of exchanges between researchers from different systems. They threaten to overshadow debates about Islam among Muslims, notably in geopolitically charged contexts such as the West African one discussed in the chapters by Frede, Sounaye, Scheele, or in diasporic contexts such as that of Asian communities in Dubai, as discussed by Mato Bouzas and Stephan-Emmrich.⁵²

Not only proponents of decolonial theory argue that the choice of terminology and concepts already assumes a hegemony of (Western) knowledge, which is deeply rejected by proponents of a delinking from Western epistemology.⁵³ Connell argues that far beyond a quest for “indigenous knowledge systems” which might boost specific postcolonial identity politics, there exists an enormous wealth of conceptual, methodological, and theoretical thought which is normally ignored in Western – and often also in ‘Southern’ – academia.⁵⁴ Numerous authors have emphasised the importance of heightened reflexivity when conducting field- and archival work, not only on one’s own positionality, but also with regard to the categories we use, the choice of objects of knowledge and research practices.⁵⁵ In this demand, both social scientists and micro-historians concur.⁵⁶ In anthropology, fieldwork has for a long time become associated with a “self-conscious shifting of social and geographical location”, enabling researchers to engage in precisely this kind of fundamental rethinking by engaging with the situatedness of knowledge and building bridges between different types of knowledges.⁵⁷ This is, in a next step when it comes to academic practice, then also linked to questions about the ‘ownership’ of knowledge, access to research outcomes and the need for a much humbler approach to knowledge by academics. Indeed, the widespread study in Western universities and the international systems of accreditation, often performed by specialised institutions or universities in the West on a global scale, result in an increasing standardisation on the basis of Western approaches and, often enough, sources at the cost of neglecting local resources for knowledge production. For example, it is striking to observe that a large number of non-Western theses about local

51 Amir-Moazami 2018, 13–19.

52 On such internal debates e.g. Hirji 2010.

53 E.g. Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 105–52.

54 Connell 2017, 8, for “South” as an exclusively relational category, see Comaroff and Comaroff 2012.

55 Santos 2018, 28f, De Vito 2019, 360f. For International Relations, see Derichs 2017, 162f.

56 Schmidt-Wellenburg and Bernhard 2020, 18, De Vito 2019, 371f.

57 Gupta and Ferguson 2008, 97f.

histories are exclusively based on imperial documents, instead of attempting to locate and use local sources.

While the call for a serious integration of local knowledge into our conceptual repertoire is well-taken, the case of the project of the Islamisation of Knowledge demonstrates some of the difficulties that may be encountered. Abaza reminds us that this project was very much linked to the rejection of Orientalism, by which it was hence strongly, albeit adversely, influenced. What is more important is that the project, which itself has a postcolonial and globalising agenda with particularly strong proponents in Malaysia and the US, is fuelled by Gulf money. Thus, it has itself become an expression of hegemonic ambitions within Islamic thought. Furthermore, proponents of this project overlook or deny that Islamic knowledge is itself deeply embedded in global interactions. Inadvertently, it thus resembles the very Western epistemology which it rejects, in perplexing ways by its search for an exclusivist identity.⁵⁸ Wedeen's dictum that "scholarly work and policy exist in the same semiotic world", formulated in the context of a critical study of US political science pertaining to the Middle East, certainly could be as much applied to the project of Islamisation of knowledge as to her initial object of study.⁵⁹

Is there a way out of the conundrum to either stick to the current social science and humanities tools, to replace them by an entirely new system or possibly to even accept that there will be many divergent scientific approaches? This would mean to abandon attempts at arriving at understandings which transcend particular societies or even groups. This question goes to a central issue in the debate about post- and decoloniality which in itself is extremely heterogeneous.⁶⁰

There are no ready answers, given the different levels at which these problems are situated and how difficult it is to rethink our analytical toolbox.⁶¹ In order to at least mitigate the problem of conceptual Eurocentrism, we attribute particular importance to local concepts and categories in full awareness of the fact that these are, as demonstrated with regard to the 'Islamisation of Knowledge' project, themselves often contested.⁶² Far from reducing them to

⁵⁸ Abaza 2000, c.f. Marfleet 2000, 29, Derichs 2017, 25, and 33–59.

⁵⁹ Wedeen 2016, 59, c.f. Anderson 2016, 233.

⁶⁰ Beyond the debate on Chakrabarty, mentioned earlier, see also the intervention by Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000.

⁶¹ The notion of an abyssal line separating North and South was first formulated by Frantz Fanon and then taken up again by Santos who speaks of epistemicide by "the Eurocentric modern sciences", Santos 2018, 20f.

⁶² Riecken 2019, 328–36 on conceptual Eurocentrism, c.f. Derichs 2017, 167.

“native epistemologies”,⁶³ in our understanding, more systematic attempts need to be made to, first of all, grasp local (emic) concepts and categories. Some authors have decided to focus on similar practices which might have yielded comparable results, for example when it comes to understandings of how people can accommodate strangers in their midst.⁶⁴ A careful consideration of how such practices relate to, are in tension with, or can be fruitfully aligned with the established (Western) academic vocabulary can help us to globalise, expand and modify our analytical vocabulary. Obviously, this demands a careful, historically sensitive process of epistemic translation in order to “reveal their contextual embeddedness”.⁶⁵ Appiah has aptly called this “thick translation” in reference to Geertz’ call for a “thick”, i.e. analytically enriched, description.⁶⁶ In a slightly different take, Diagne argues that we might not be able to express the universal in a common conceptual language.⁶⁷ Like Appiah, he promotes the idea of translation as a way towards an understanding of “the universal in a world liberated from the assumption of a universal grammar and the narrative of a unique *telos*”.⁶⁸ In his work on Swahili Muslim Publics, Kresse convincingly demonstrates how such a culturally sensitive process of what might be called approximative translation can be imagined, which would also have to include reference to conventions of intonation, but also to social practices.⁶⁹

Most of the practitioners of different disciplines in this volume do not address these fundamental conceptual questions, even though most would probably be able to agree on the existing tensions and on universality as an aspirational horizon which recognises the existing particularities.⁷⁰ They do, however, share our belief in the importance of close and sustained cooperation between academics from different scholarly traditions and with diverse linguistic and regional backgrounds and expertise, as well as in exchanges between activists and academics. Only such exchanges, we argue, can contribute to overcoming or at least mitigating some of the epistemological blockades and limitations evident in older approaches to the study of humankind. This requires many

⁶³ Conrad 2016, 195.

⁶⁴ Freitag 2020.

⁶⁵ Derichs 2017, 3, *ibid.*, 1–7, for a succinct discussion of the problem at hand.

⁶⁶ Appiah 1993, particularly 817–19, Hermans 2003. Again, a wide variety of approaches in practice emerge, see, for example, the more action-oriented approach in Santos 2018.

⁶⁷ C.f. Jackson 1–26.

⁶⁸ Diagne 2013, para 23.

⁶⁹ Kresse 2018, 10–27, a similar approach, albeit on a more explicitly comparative scale, informs Freitag’s discussion of cosmopolitanism (Freitag 2020).

⁷⁰ Zerilli 2002. Vatin, 2015, formulates one such quest to move forward.

instances of un- and re-thinking, and a distinct willingness to engage critically with central tenets of academic methodology.⁷¹

The composition of contributors to this volume mirrors this approach which is also at the heart of research at ZMO. Sustained cooperation built on reciprocity, trust, communication and fairness, based on rules of good academic practice, can contribute to a research agenda reflecting interests of researchers of different backgrounds.⁷² Such cooperation, we argue, helps to continuously challenge many of the naturalised assumptions, theoretical conceptions and practices of academics from different environments while, at the same time, it is also building research alliances beyond traditional research environments. Anderson relates a crucial moment in her academic career which illustrates the fundamentally important dimension of such cooperation: She recalls how her Tunisian adviser questioned some of the underlying assumptions which had prompted her to propose the study of peasantry, thereby revealing the close connections between this project and wider US political concerns at the time. She also emphasises the importance of the encounters with Tunisian and Libyan colleagues for altering her perspectives, and making her take note of what she alone “would never have seen”.⁷³ Her experience mirrors that of many of us who had the good fortune of similar encounters and collaborative undertakings.

The sections of this book

The contributions to this volume are organised into three sections, namely ‘Making translocal Muslim spaces’, ‘Defining and controlling Islam in the nation-state’, and ‘Claiming and translating norms and ideas’. As will become evident in the brief introduction of the contributions that follows, these sections are not mutually exclusive, but rather focus on what we consider to be the articles’ core contributions.

⁷¹ Even if one does not follow Santos 2018, 107–207 in everything, the call for a re-examination of methodology is well-taken.

⁷² This list is inspired by Messner, Guarín, and Haun 2013, 15–22, which is used by Derichs 2017, 176f. The issue at stake here is not global cooperation but fruitful collegiality in a small and relatively sheltered research environment, their criteria describe well the ground rules for cooperation, even though their translation into practice can prove challenging.

⁷³ Anderson 2019, 442.

Making translocal Muslim spaces

Global intellectual, spiritual, and labour networks (have) manifest(ed) themselves in a plethora of translocal Muslim spaces. Even though Islam was, and is, not always at the centre of these interactions, it remains a latent resource for building trusting relationships, claiming authority, and negotiating identity and Muslimness, as the four chapters in this section explore. They engage with the actual formation and maintenance of translocal spaces, which are historically contingent and, we argue, need to be based on concrete practices.

The case studies investigated by Mato Bouzas and Stephan-Emmrich illustrate the making of translocal spaces by investigating distinct practices of migration, support networks, and the circulation of thoughtful charitable gifts. In these cases, translocality results from labour migration to the Gulf; in Mato Bouzas' case from the Baltistan region in north-eastern Pakistan, and in Stephan-Emmrich's from Tajikistan. In both instances, Islam emerges as an important emotional and ideational bond that strongly enhances and gives meaning to the practices described. Mato Bouzas' case, namely that of development aid, is based on specifically Shi'i networks. In Stephan-Emmrich's case, the Tajik migrants' perception of the Gulf as an ideal space of Sunni Islam crosscuts ethnic and linguistic affinities and, at the same time, forges bonds that veil unequal work relations.

Mato Bouzas' article differentiates between the translocal Muslim connections by exploring the intricacies of intra-Shi'i interactions with 'the Other'.⁷⁴ One of its dimensions is the clash, within the translocal Shi'i network, of regionally different notions of morality. Thus, beyond creating bonds, this cooperation also enhances notions of difference, hierarchy, and – eventually – opportunity. In this particular case, the relevant units are Baltistan and Kuwait (and/or 'the Gulf'). An obvious cause of hierarchy is the wealth differential – possibly bolstered by a claim to more authentic religious knowledge on the side of the Arab nationals on the Peninsula.⁷⁵ While this is – to some degree – speculative in the case of Mato Bouzas' paper, it comes out very clearly in the one by Stephan-Emmrich. She deals with the gifting of high-quality copies of the Quran by Gulf charities (in her case mostly from Dubai) to migrants from Central Asia. This missionary work not only carries spiritual rewards, it also helps to establish a hegemonic understanding of an Arab Islam among a population that

⁷⁴ For a comparable case study, in this case referring to Kerala, see Osella and Osella 2010.

⁷⁵ This can be linked to the strengthening of a more Arabocentric identity in Gulf societies, for this see Onley 2005, 62.

seemingly easily shifts between the Persianate and the Arab ‘culturescapes’. This almost quintessential manifestation of ‘material religion’ also transmits a project of political influence and the ideal notion of a socio-economic hegemonic project, the model of Dubai.⁷⁶ Quite obviously, both the hegemonic message as well as the reminder of the migratory process also hints at the many painful processes and experiences involved in labour migration — a reminder that translocal linkages are not, in and of themselves, a positive phenomenon.

Wien’s chapter moves us to consider a quite different situation, namely that of two transnational migrants. Nur Hamada, the main female protagonist, was a Syrian Druze feminist who, together with her brother Amin, perhaps best described as an impresario with poetic inclinations, travelled the US and Europe before, and disappearing from the records by 1940. Wien investigates how these two characters that he – following Goebel and Brubaker – describes as ‘ethno-political entrepreneurs’, managed to play on American and European imaginations of Islam, both by converts and by Christians or agnostics. This illustrates yet a different context, namely that of Western societies in which Muslims were, at the time, still a more or less exotic minority attracting a specific group of admirers and followers among the artistically inclined bourgeoisie while, at the same time, starting to build a basic infrastructure of faith.⁷⁷ Wien makes an important point which links his contribution to those by Mato Bouzas in this, and Kempen in the last section, namely that Muslimness was very much defined in interaction both with other Muslims and with non-Muslims.

Defining and controlling Islam in the nation-state

While translocal space continues to play a certain role in this second section, its focus shifts to the often-uneasy relationship between nation-states, Islamic institutions and ordinary Muslims. In the current international order, the naturalised – albeit by no means natural – nation-state remains the internationally condoned unit of political organisation. The four chapters illustrate in different

⁷⁶ On the strong influence of Dubai as an iconic model, see chapters 2, and 18–21 in Wippel, Bromber, Steiner, and Krawietz 2014; for the notion of and importance of ‘material mediation’, see Meyer 2003.

⁷⁷ Famous examples of such converts in Europe are Muhammad Asad (orig. Leopold Weiss), Esad Bey (orig. Lev Nussimbaum, aka Kurban Said) and Hugo Marcus. Studies about the latter by Windhager 2002, Reiss 2005 and Baer 2020 also reveal something of the imaginations linked to Islam, whereas the contributions in Nordbruch and Ryad 2014 concentrate more on the religious and scholarly aspects.

ways how difficult it is to contain and discipline the potentially universal claims of an imagined affective community as well as those of powerful international organisations and players such as the European Union.

The first three contributions are set in the West African Sahel (Sounaye) and, more specifically, in Mauritania (Frede) and Mali (Scheele). As Sounaye shows, current contestations in the region unfold in a context of increased transnational Jihadism and, in response, a securitisation strongly supported by France and the European Union. The latter has been coupled, on an ideological level, with programmes of de-radicalisation supported by international organisations that target jihadists as radicalised, misguided individuals. These are persecuted and, when arrested, sometimes offered programmes of re-education and reintegration.

The contributions by Frede and Scheele engage with the same context. Frede demonstrates how the wider perspectives on Islam in the Sahel translate into a contestation over a particular Mauritanian institution, the *mahdara*, a local version of an (advanced) Quranic school. She traces how an established institution of Islamic learning, which is more socially inclusive than state institutions, has found itself at the centre-stage of state and public debates around Islam, and inspired attempts by different sides to influence the curricula. As a consequence, Frede argues, Islam becomes ever more politicised and divorced from its spiritual foundations. Scheele draws even nearer in scale of observation by moving to the local level of northern Mali – and indeed beyond Mali – as the national boundaries on the very fringes of the Sahara are not the only ones that are important, since many of the actors concerned hold multiple nationalities. Here, the “horizon of affect” or, perhaps more aptly, horizons of kinship and genealogy seem far more relevant than state bureaucracies in which the local actors have few stakes.⁷⁸ Similar to Stephan-Emmrich’s case study in the last section, Islam, in Scheele’s perspective, is one idiom in which regional and transregional struggles are couched, but also an idiom which allows to overcome genealogical and ethnic divisions.

El Guabli engages, like Frede, with a context in which the state attempts to domesticate Islam and monopolise its interpretation. The chapter is set in the period when the so-called ‘Years of Lead’, i.e. of authoritarian rule in Morocco, were finally discussed critically in public (ca. 1998–2018) and an official process of reconciliation was institutionalised through the work of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission between 2004 and 2006 to establish the facts about state violence, and compensate its victims and their surviving relatives. El Guabli

78 Brandel and Randeria 2018, 75f.

notes how Islamist victims of this violence have been almost systematically overlooked in the formal process as well as in public debates. In a discursive process of ‘compensating’ for this absence of a group which is still at odds with important tenets of the state-defined version of Islam, there has been an attempt at ‘Islamising’ some of the existing memories. Guabli identifies a hitherto untapped archive of Islamist memory and calls for further critical examinations of these politically distinct visions discernible in national memory.

Taken together, the contributions call for a more structured reflection on the many overlapping political and affective geographies. What is the role of the nation state in a constellation where international governmental actors (such as the EU, UN, Islamic organisations, or external nation states), and formal non-governmental actors (such as development agencies, but also religious associations of various kinds) rival the nation state, and where the latter is also challenged by local or regional actors such as ethnic or kinship groups which might or might not be bounded by the borders of the nation-state? The question of the state’s legitimacy and ability to mediate or intervene as well as different models of participation and deliberation, seem to play an important role for the ways in which these relations play out, both in the Muslim majority and Muslim minority contexts discussed. Recent debates about governance in areas of limited statehood seem to offer a range of possible insights not only into the conflict constellations but also into historical modes and current conditions of mediating at least some of the effects. While “limited statehood” already takes the normative model of the state as its starting point, the recognition of non-state ‘civil’ actors and an extension of the notion of governance offer some prospects with regard to rethinking politics in such contexts.⁷⁹ In view of the multitude of translocal and transnational Muslim actors and organisations, the nation-state’s attempts to define and control ‘Islam’ are likely to be transient at best, unless that state arrives at achieving wide-spread legitimacy while, at the same time, imposing (its version of) Islam as the most relevant affective community. Given Scheele’s insistence on how ‘Islam’ has become discursively superimposed on and entangled with other possible ways of constructing community, such a development would seem very far off indeed, notably given the often authoritarian nature of states which are engaged in such enterprises.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ See the contributions in Risse, Börzel, and Draude 2018, notably sections III, IV, and VI.

⁸⁰ For a current example, see the attempts in Saudi Arabia to impose ‘moderate Islam’. To what extent the somewhat idealistic principles outlined in Bamyeh 2004 would offer an alternative, goes beyond the scope of this work.

Claiming and translating norms and ideas

The last section explores the intersections of hegemonic, globalised norms and local sense-making or indigenisation of concepts, especially when contradicting values are at stake. Casini's chapter takes us to a modern genre — the novel. By introducing three major works, he discusses not only developments in the genre since the early 20th century, but also how the genre's evolution mirrors changing concepts of political and religious order. This historicises, in an important way, notions of permanence — notably in connection with religion — and thus opens the view onto visions of world and order by the authors. The notions range, in brief, from a socio-political modernisation framed in an Islamic vocabulary of *shari'a* to religion as a social force in the novels of Tawfiq al-Hakim and Naguib Mahfuz. The last novel is set in Kuwait. It mirrors the concerns of some of the earlier chapters with translocally connected Muslim sectarianism that seems to challenge the nation state. Beyond demonstrating the literary development in its wider Arab and international context, the reflection of current concerns in these novels points to the wider circulations of models, arguments, and ideas. In a somewhat disturbing manner, it also seems to reflect the dangers of particular postcolonial approaches which tend to emphasise the separate identities of disadvantaged groups.

Haniffa takes us to the context of the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka after the long-lasting Civil War (1983–2009). She shows how the Muslim community is struggling at two fronts: While a process based on global notions of post-conflict reconciliation was initiated between the Sinhalese majority and the defeated Tamil population in the North of the island, the Muslim population, dispersed across most regions and not really a party to the war, has been confronted with a growing anti-Muslim sentiment. The image of Muslims is that of a militant minority, leading once again to a discourse of securitisation. Internally, the Muslim community is torn in many different directions, quite in line with developments in the wider Muslim discursive and organisational universe.⁸¹ Haniffa critically discusses how the All Ceylon Jamiathul Ulema has tried to establish a unified discourse in order to secure its own leadership and the recognition of Muslims on the national scale. This process, however, occurred at the cost of imposing rather rigid and conservative politics which had dire consequences, for example for women's rights

Kempen's chapter takes us to a very new phenomenon, or rather one which is new in terms of its framing and public articulation, namely the LGBTQIA+

⁸¹ This formulation borrows Asad's notion of Islam as a discursive tradition (Asad 2009).

community in Jordan and in the wider Arab world and diaspora. The Amman-based online magazine, *My.Kali*, explicitly serves a translocal, Arabophone queer community, and adopts positions formulated in a clearly globalised context. It is itself an expression of how gay rights' activists are challenging hegemonic gender norms and concepts in the Middle East. Beyond local resistance, this LGBTQIA+ community is also confronted with Western perceptions of Muslim homophobia which are shared by LGBTQIA+ activists in the West. On the basis of selected articles, Kempen outlines how, in such a complicated constellation, activists insist on their right to appropriate the discourse on LGBTQIA+ rights as well as Islam. They thus show one more facet of an Islam which is subject to different interpretations, internal struggles over interpretation, and can absorb of social questions and problems which might have long-existed without being framed, or conceived, as challenging the existing moral order.

The final chapter of this book is by Abdulkader Tayob and engages, once again, explicitly with Islamic Studies. He expresses a distinct unease with post-colonial readings of Islam which, he argues, tend to gloss over international inequalities and structures of domination. For example, Tayob demonstrates how attempts to stress Muslim agency tend to overshadow old and new hegemonies. Engaging with recent scholarship by, who he calls, 'insider exiles', scholars who are part of the Islamic tradition but at the same time master the Western academic repertoire, he argues in favour of a strand of scholarship which puts an emphasis on ethics. Moreover, he makes an important point about the need to forego the distinction between 'objective outsiders' (i.e. non-Muslim scholars of Islam) and 'committed believing scholars' by stressing the crucial contribution of the latter. He thereby also lays bare one of the many blind spots common among Western academic practitioners: While an acknowledgement of positionality by now is the standard lore of scholars, hegemonic reflexes still distinguish between the positionality of 'objective outsiders' and 'believers'. If we want to advance truly in our understanding of the manifold facets of Islam and Muslim worlds, we do not only need to put them in a broader and comparative perspective, we also have to form a scholarly community which transcends these (and other) false boundaries.

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Part I: **Making Translocal Muslim Spaces**

Antía Mato Bouzas

Framing Religion in a Transnational Space

Migration, Development Cooperation, and Faith Solidarity between the Gulf and Pakistan

Abstract: This chapter examines the role of religion in a transnational space, shaped mainly by migrant and development actors between the region of Baluchistan, in north-eastern Pakistan, and Kuwait. Migration from Baluchistan to the Gulf, and to Kuwait in particular, is strongly connected to a specific socio-economic context determined by the existence of the Kashmir dispute, but also to a shared religious belonging to the Twelver Shia faith of Islam. Development aid from Kuwait in north-eastern Pakistan is framed in socio-economic terms and in terms of the religious duty in Islam to share and distribute wealth, although this charity activity does not require that the recipients follow the same faith. By addressing the understanding of the religious among actors involved in this transnational space, such as migrants, employees, and donors of economic aid, the chapter discusses the interrelations between the religious and the political (as the realm of the public sphere) in the context of this transnational space. While noting that religion helps to structure specific collectives beyond existing sovereign borders and therefore has an ordering character that amounts to a political dimension, the understanding of the religious in transnational spaces cannot be divorced from existing power hierarchies in which religion is inscribed.

Introduction

Social scientists working on religion have long debated the methodological relevance of providing a definition of the concept. This discussion becomes even more entangled if we consider the role of religion in politics, as politics deals with religion as part of the social field, while religion is understood by believers as all-encompassing. On the one hand, the political use of the religious situates religion within specific boundaries or a sphere, a way of reassigning the meaning of the religious. On the other hand, believers and political scientists alike agree on the immanent character of religion, even though they may differ in distinguishing the manifestations of the religious. These considerations make it difficult to agree on a conceptualisation of religion in the field of inter-

national politics which is relevant for the study of transnational spaces. Although religion ‘orders’ (the community of believers, international religious organisations, etc.), religion is not per se an order separate from politics, and in an ideal type religion requires enforcement at the social level.

Social scientists who focus on religion in the field of sociology and political science are perspectivists, that is, researchers who rely on observations (manifestations) of religions and their influence in politics.¹ This approach invariably raises both the question of from where these observations are made and the debate about religion versus secularisation/post-secularisation. As Bader reminds us in his critique of Habermas’ post-secularisation thesis, there are no completely secularised states or societies, and religion “is not generally subjectivised or privatised, and the state and (organised) religions are not strictly separated.”² In this respect, Bader relates the study of religion in the post-secular context to a debate about liberal-democratic constitutionalism and this approach is strongly shaped by the experience of the development of the Western European state. The question remains if the same can be said of the differentiated trajectories of the Global South.

In order to address this question, I discuss the role of religion in the making of transnational spaces as a way to study international politics, and I do so by analysing a case of transnationalism between Kuwait and Pakistan. Specifically, I explore the role of religion in what I call a migration and development network between Kuwait and Baltistan, an autonomous territory in north-eastern Pakistan. Baltistan is one of the two administrative divisions of Gilgit-Baltistan and the most homogeneous in terms of language, Balti, and religion, with the prevalence of Twelver Shia Islam. For the analysis of the role of religion, I consider this network within the broader transnational interactions between South Asia and the Gulf. This network is characterised by the reciprocal relationship between migrants from the Baltistan region working in Kuwait, members of the Kuwaiti merchant class supporting development projects in Baltistan, and religious leaders from Baltistan strengthening their position as power brokers in the political context of Baltistan through their involvement in educational work and as a result of their preaching and fundraising activities in the Gulf. Religion is initially conceived in terms of belonging to the same faith, since the majority of the members of this network adhere to the Twelver Shia sect of Islam, although the meaning of the religious is redefined through practice. I examine the role of religion in terms of its non-territorial character and based on the assump-

¹ Bader 2012, 6–11, Luhmann 2000, Owen 2000, 173, Haynes 2016.

² Bader 2012, 13.

tion that religions contain worldviews about the organisation of social life on earth. Through existing religious structures and organisations, religious actors (leaders and the community of believers) work to influence world society in specific ways, and in most the cases this has political consequences.

Part of the problem in grasping the religious lies in the gap between top-down approaches, that is, between an organised (or recognised) religious system and the existence in society of a wide array of actors who also have their own assumptions about the religious and may display them for specific purposes. In this sense, Schwarz and Lynch propose to examine religion as practice in order to challenge fixed, historicised categories of the religious.³ This exercise implies considering the religious dimension as an attempt to incorporate the insider-orientated endeavour into social analysis in order to understand the reality of a particular worldview.⁴ Bottom-up approaches must therefore be included, but they should be contextualised by the structures in which actors operate and the deterritorialised element of religion vis-à-vis the territorialised nation state.

The chapter is structured as follows. It begins with some general considerations on the role religion plays via historical and migration processes between South Asia and the Gulf, exploring the relationship between the religious and the political (the realm of the public sphere). Then the second section moves within the general context of Pakistani migration to the Gulf, to describe migration from north-eastern Pakistan to Kuwait and how it is intertwined with the activities of religious actors with transnational links with the Gulf. Finally, the last section addresses the religious dimension of Kuwaiti development cooperation in north-eastern Pakistan as understood by donors and migrants. By exploring the meanings of the religious in this migrant and development network, I advance some considerations about the role of the religious in these transnational spaces and the potential overlapping of the religious with the political. This study is based on fieldwork carried out in Baltistan (north-eastern Pakistan) and Kuwait in 2017, 2018, and 2019 for a total period of about three months. Fieldwork activities consisted of interviews and participation in some activities involving this migrant community.

³ Schwarz and Lynch 2016.

⁴ Sheikh 2015, 136.

The religious and the political in the transnational context of South Asia and the Gulf

Contemporary political developments in the Gulf region and in South Asia attach great importance to religious identity politics because of the mobilisation of actors who claim themselves to act on behalf of religion or according to religious principles, and due to state politics who directly or indirectly interfere with the religious sphere. This is the case of the Shia-Sunni sectarian differentiation in the Gulf region, which is represented in the state version as a matter of rivalry politics between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In South Asia, the developments in state politics play a major role. In India, the recent Citizenship Amendment bill of December 2019 questions the basis of Indian secularism because it clearly discriminates Muslims' access to citizenship. While scholars working in the field of international politics recognise the increasing importance of religion in influencing world affairs, they admit the difficulties of thinking about religious worldviews or, for that matter, approaching religion as an object of inquiry.⁵ The question is: What are we referring to when we discuss the role of religion in international politics? This is particularly true if, as Halliday observed, we assume that religious actors have not proposed any new form of political space and they normally, as the case of Iran illustrates, operate within the framework of existing institutions.⁶

The political use of the religious has received more attention in the study of political developments outside the most-developed parts of the world (with a few notable exceptions), while the question of the immanent character of religion has invited less scholarly reflection – except for the cases of India, which embraced its own version of secularism after decolonisation (religious pluralism in a religiously neutral state), China, and a few others. The immanent character of religion has often been regarded as a matter of degree, that is, in terms of how much/less religious a given society is, and what a 'good religion' is. Cesari, for example, considers 'civil Islam,' a concept she borrows from Robert Hefner, but one that she uses to indicate "the common reference for the public expression of all citizens under the same political rule".⁷ She analyses 'civil Islam' in the Muslim majority societies of Indonesia and Senegal (each of them with different

⁵ Hurd 2004, Fox and Sandler 2004, 2–3.

⁶ Halliday 2000, 131–41. The Taliban in Afghanistan could also be added to this.

⁷ Cesari 2018, 110.

articulations of national identity) as a framework for a wide range of freedoms.⁸ She refers to ‘civil Islam’ as articulations of Islam that are based on social organisations that interact with state institutions as part of a consensual political culture, which is, in my opinion, connected with the functioning of liberal democracy.⁹

In order to examine what counts as religious in the transnational space formed by migrant and development actors between the Gulf and South Asia, I consider the actors who engage in activities deemed religious – such as education, preaching, performing rituals, fundraising for socially religious oriented purposes – as Sheikh pointed out,¹⁰ but I also problematise the boundaries of religion. It is important to understand genealogical issues (why a believer follows a specific religious leader or tradition and whether a believer hails from a certain religious family), how they are acknowledged by the actors participating in these networks, and the motivations of these actors. The boundaries of religion are analysed through the actors’ own understanding of the subject and through their activities.

An analysis of the role of religion in transnational spaces appears, in the first place, determined by two apparently contradicting issues: the deterritorialised character of religion as a system of beliefs and communication (religion has no borders), and its localised manifestations that tend to coincide with existing state boundaries (in the sense of an identification of Iran as a Shia majoritarian state, or Pakistan and Saudi Arabia as Sunni majoritarian states and their acting with a religious dimension in international politics). Religious transnational actors such as political parties, whether in Europe, the Middle East, or South Asia, maintain transnational synergies inherent to universalistic values, but at the same time their focus and agendas remain within the boundaries of the states in which they operate.¹¹ Although religion shapes transnational spaces, it cannot be said that these spaces are homogenous or primarily religious, as they are strongly embedded in the realities of a given regional, state, or local context. Moreover, they are also an expression of globalisation processes.¹² In her work on Shia transnational networks, Laurence Louër recognises how initially deterritorialised actors, such as representatives of Shia Islam, have come to terms

⁸ Cesari 2018, 109–40.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 125–26.

¹⁰ Sheikh 2015.

¹¹ Perhaps one of the few exceptions to this is the Jamaat-e-Islami of Jammu and Kashmir, which defends the region on the Indian side to be merged with Pakistan.

¹² Reetz 2013.

with the politics of the nation state, while at the same time taking on a globalised character.¹³

Islam plays an important role in ongoing processes of transnationalisation between the Gulf and South Asia. The Gulf has influenced religious life in the Indian subcontinent for centuries, and South Asia has been home to revivalist movements that have expanded elsewhere, including to the Gulf.¹⁴ Islam spreads through the activities of organised religious actors, through the actions of individuals shaped by specific life trajectories, and through economic relations (such as trade in the past and migration in the present). By crossing state boundaries, Islam becomes the object of agendas at various levels (governmental, regional, local) in a process that may lead to transformations in society. Islam travels, but also often experiences a process of adaptation to the local context, that is, it also becomes localised.¹⁵

The Gulf remains the territorial epicentre of Islamic traditions. However, for decades, political scientists dealing with social mobilisation have not considered religion to play a central role in major political developments, except in the Iranian revolution.¹⁶ After the invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 there came a turning point in the consideration of the religious question. Although preserving its territorial integrity, but not a sovereign state anymore, the power vacuum in Iraq was filled with a mobilisation of religious groups with diverse agendas. In particular, the previously oppressed Shia majority rose up, mobilised by religious clerics, and characterised by factionalism. More broadly, religious movements preoccupied with the renewal or purification of Islam have become important political actors, which in turn reinforce sectarian belonging. These developments have caused scholars working on the Gulf to increasingly examine the region through the lens of sectarian divisions between Sunni and Shia and the role of the petro-monarchies in funding religious movements elsewhere.¹⁷ Religion in this sense is tantamount to identity, as a factor of mobilisation for purposes that can sometimes be oppositional, and for addressing existing oppressions. For example, it is used to advance claims for justice for religious minorities, i.e. the Shia in Saudi Arabia, but also as an instrument of autocratic rulers to undermine political demands

¹³ Louër 2011, 297–98.

¹⁴ Gupta 2017, Ahmad 2017.

¹⁵ Green 2011.

¹⁶ Halliday 1988, 31–63, Skocpol 1994, 247–50.

¹⁷ Matthiesen 2013.

for justice, as in the case of the ruling monarchy in Bahrain against the demands for rights by the Shia majority population.

Muslim majority societies in the Gulf do not necessarily mobilise along religious lines, although there are groups with specific religious agendas that took part in the mobilisations connected to the 'Arab spring'. Furthermore, Gulf monarchies do not follow an explicitly theocratic agenda, neither in their domestic nor in their foreign policy. Saudi-Iranian rivalry, for example, has an important religious dimension in terms of competing for a hegemonic religion (Sunni vs Shia Islam) that is no different from other ideological movements and often confronts the realities of religiously plural societies. Gulf monarchies do not act differently from other dominant actors in the state system: while they agree with the principle of state sovereignty and the sanctity of state boundaries at home, they try to exert influence elsewhere, often ignoring the principle of territorial integrity, as illustrated by the case of Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen.

Like any other religion, Islam is thus inclusive of the community of believers, but as a political project, Islam will always encounter the problem of Muslims who belong to the faith but on unequal terms, e.g. because of being cultural minorities, deprived social groups, or individuals who make new demands on the community, etc. This is similar to Rancière's understanding of politics as *la part sans part* (2009), that helps to reconfigure the relationship between the religious and the political in the sense that religious subjects, considered as non-political subjects, become political agents when they make claims in the public sphere.¹⁸

The former can be exemplified in the case studied for purposes of analysis, and can be termed a transnational Shia space. Participants in the development and migrant network between north-eastern Pakistan and the Gulf belong to this faith and operate following channels connected to Shia groups and organisations. However, this labelling does not imply that there is a specific political aim connected to this religious dimension. Migrants from north-eastern Pakistan travel to the Gulf in search of work and the prospects of improving their life conditions, and whilst they certainly prefer to work for families or companies of the same faith, some of them commented in interviews that they would have preferred to go to Europe if they had the option. Religion per se is not a driving force for their activities, and they are often critical of Gulf regimes who treat them as foreigners, and often discriminate them on the basis of their lower social status. Instead of feelings of attachment due to shared religious faith, the

¹⁸ Morrison 2013, 899.

Gulf experience is often framed in critical terms. However, on the whole, the activities of these transnational networks have a political impact because some actors gain power and influence with the reorganisation of social boundaries (i.e. empowering Shia communities in north-eastern Pakistan or empowering Shia merchant classes in Kuwait). In other words, they become visible in the political system and their religious identity constitutes an important marker.

Religious ideas continue to flow via religiously motivated actors (ranging from individual students to organisations) pursuing religious agendas, but especially through migrants' experiences which depend very much on their own engagement with their homeland and with the receiving societies.¹⁹ This engagement can be motivated by integration or acquisition of knowledge in the host society, or by a sense of exclusion, reinforcing their beliefs about a perceived hostile environment in the host society. However, migrants' religious experiences as a distinct social group (those who have worked and lived abroad for a period of time) have, in general, limited possibilities to effect a radical change in the political system in their homeland regarding the religious orientation (for example, at the state level). They can certainly influence political agendas through their economic power or knowledge by supporting actors or groups with certain religious orientations. The same applies to religious transnational political parties, such as Jamaat-e-Islami, which are often involved in providing knowledge transfer for mobilisation purposes, charity work, and receive funding to develop their political agendas in a transnational context. In most of these cases, religion or the religious in transnational processes between South Asia and the Gulf functions as a reinforcement of existing transnational ties, as a non-territorial relationship that shapes collective identity – and also individual identity. This relationship structures socio-spatial relations (addresses inequalities, provides support, and promotes specific religiously-oriented actions) and creates specific geographies of knowledge, but has little influence on the international system.

¹⁹ Gupta 2017, Ahmad 2017.

Migration from Baltistan to Kuwait: Contextualising religion

Different communities in present-day Pakistan have a long tradition of settlement in the Gulf that precedes the discovery of oil in the region, and the formation of the Pakistani state in 1947.²⁰ However, the development of the oil industry and subsequent modernisation of the Gulf States after the 1930s triggered large-scale migration from what are today the territories of Pakistan. Pakistanis are at present among the largest migrant populations in many Gulf States. The Gulf functions as a destination for the excess labour unable to be absorbed into the Pakistani labour market. Pakistani migration is constituted mainly of unskilled or semiskilled workers, but there is also a significant presence of highly qualified professionals and technical expertise, attracted by competitive salaries. The boom in Pakistani migration to the Gulf occurred in the 1970s and 1980s during the governments of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Zia ul Haq. While both leaders saw migration as a source of remittances for the country and as a way to gain influence in the Gulf States, they adopted very different approaches. Bhutto favoured a policy of sending highly skilled workers (doctors and teachers) to countries such as Oman, while Zia ul Haq strengthened the military cooperation by sending military personnel and advisors to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

It was under the rule of Zia ul Haq – who initiated the Islamisation policy of the state – that Gulf migration began to be associated with a religious overtone. This does not mean, however, that the Islamisation policy of Pakistan and the rise of religion in its institutions (especially that of the texts and traditions of the Sunni sect of Islam) is the result of a bottom-up transformation at the societal level; on the contrary, it was a top-down policy driven by geopolitical considerations. The triumph of the Shia revolution in Iran and the Pakistani collaboration with the US, to support the Afghan mujahideen against the pro-Soviet government in Kabul, were important factors that mobilised religion from above.²¹ In this broader context, migration channels were natural means through which migrants became socialised and familiarised with Gulf traditions. However, they were also channels employed by other actors (sometimes religiously motivated) with specific political agendas, such as the recruitment of mujahideen for the Afghan war, or the dissemination of more intolerant religious views.

²⁰ Addleton 1992, 41–42.

²¹ Coll 2004, Siddiqi 2007.

Pakistani migrants in the Gulf States are confronted with different varieties or interpretations of the Islamic tradition and these experiences affect their trajectories once they return to Pakistan. Sometimes they would adopt these traditions, inducing changes in their most immediate home contexts, at other times, they would remain unaffected (if not hostile) to these influences. The Arabian Peninsula, as the birthplace of Islam, plays a moral role for Pakistani Muslims, but migrants' religious views while working in the Gulf States are also moulded by their own immediate experiences and encounters, often characterised by open discrimination due to unequal social relations. During my research in Baltistan among migrants to the Gulf States, they often defined Gulf societies, and Saudi Arabia in particular, as being dominated by 'non-good Muslims'. They would relate this assessment to personal experiences of abuse, fraud, and a perceived lack of respect for other human beings in these wealthy societies.

Characteristics of migration from Baltistan to Kuwait

The transnational space – formed by migrant networks from Baltistan to Kuwait – is shaped by three main characteristics. First, the territory of Gilgit-Baltistan, to which Baltistan belongs, is part of the Kashmir dispute. Although migrants from this region are indistinguishable from other Pakistani migrants abroad – because they carry normal Pakistani passports – they are not full state citizens at home. This affects these migrants' strategies while abroad. Second, migrants from Baltistan operate mainly through strong personal networks that get them work permits, with links to the Gulf, and are therefore less reliant on the often abusive recruitment agencies. Third, the majority of these migrants belongs to the Twelver Shia faith of Islam (a minority in Pakistan but a majority in Gilgit-Baltistan), and religious marking seems to play a role in this migration channel; many migrants are employed by Shia families who, in the case of Kuwait, belong to the traditional merchant class and share nationalist values more than, for example, the more Islamist-militant views of the nouveau Shia riche. Thus, in order to understand this transnational space, we need to pay attention to the respective contexts that favour this transnational engagement, the personal element in the establishment of relations, and the role exercised by religion.

The legal status of Gilgit-Baltistan is linked to the Kashmir dispute, but the region is gradually being integrated into the Pakistani state.²² By 'being inte-

²² Mato Bouzas 2017.

grated' we refer to the fact that the Pakistani executive and judicial powers enact decisions and laws that display sovereign competences over this territory. However, parts of the Pakistani Citizenship Act do not apply to Gilgit-Baltistan in full, and therefore there are important restrictions on the political and legal rights of people. Baltistan is the administrative division located in the south, bordering the Line of Control with Ladakh, India. The social landscape of Gilgit-Baltistan is culturally and linguistically diverse, partly due to it being a high-mountain region with deep valleys, which has historically favoured isolation and privileged some channels of communication channels over others.

Being part of the Kashmir dispute determines many aspects of social life in Gilgit-Baltistan – political freedom, rights, development – but potential integration into the Pakistani state also raises some uncertainties in the society. The specifically Sunni, identitarian dimension of the Pakistani state is seen by some scholars as an obstacle to the incorporation a Shia-majority area.²³ More recently, the viability of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor – a megaproject that involves the creation of a large amount of infrastructure in Pakistan with China's support – has also added some real concerns due to its dramatic impacts on the local populations and its more general geopolitical implications. China has demanded that Pakistan integrate Gilgit-Baltistan in order to develop projects there, and Beijing is already providing services such as the internet.²⁴ The Sino-Pakistani collaboration is a source of irritation to political and defence circles in India, who believe that China is actually in control of the territory.

In this context, migration from Baltistan to other parts of Pakistan and to the Gulf is strongly linked to the lack of economic opportunities associated with political uncertainties. The border with Ladakh is closed and communications with the rest of Pakistan are limited to a daily flight (subject to weather conditions), a wretched road to Islamabad, via Gilgit, and a seasonal road through the Deosai plain that connects the region during the summer. Although it is not accurate to say that Baltistan is a fully landlocked territory, it is certainly peripheral in terms of communications. The existence of the dispute favours investments (infrastructure) related to military needs, and the army occupies a large amount of land that could be used for other productive activities. Periodic cross-border skirmishes make it difficult for rural populations to tend their fields. Moreover, except for a few entrepreneurial agricultural initiatives supported by the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP), there are no possibilities to develop small industries, with the only exception of tourism. Indeed,

²³ Shaikh 2009, 66–67, Stöber 2007, 407.

²⁴ *Dawn* 2016.

tourism has experienced a boom since 2014 and some migrants in the Gulf are investing in this sector. In sum, migration to the Gulf is determined by economic considerations connected to the political status of Gilgit-Baltistan. Significantly, the largest group of migrants from Baltistan in Kuwait are from the border areas near the Line of Control.

The second aforementioned characteristic of migration from Baltistan to the Gulf is its organisation around strong personal networks and the only occasional use by migrants of the riskier recruitment agencies. The origins of migration to Kuwait, which consists of some 1,400 adult males at the time of research in 2018 and 2019, can be traced to one man, Sheikh Hassan Mehdiabadi, a former religious student from Baltistan in Iraq who ended up in Kuwait in the 1970s. He left Iraq during Saddam Hussein's massive expulsion of Shias on the accusation of the latter being the fifth column of Iran. Once in Kuwait, he began to preach in the *hussainiyas* (Shiite congregation halls, mostly known in South Asia as *imambargahs*) about the condition of people in Baltistan and, through this activity, he met with influential members of the Kuwaiti Shia merchant class whilst raising funds for his own charity activities at home. He provided an account of the political situation of Baltistan to promote support for his fundraising, as members of these families still recall. Migrants who travelled to the Gulf state through the mediation of Sheikh Hassan, and whom I interviewed in February 2019, also identified Sheikh Hassan as a mediator who, in the context of his own charity activities, asked the Kuwaiti families to employ people from his home region. At present, other religious figures from Baltistan continue to be related to this migration network, although it is unclear if their activities are limited to religious and charity work or if they have a specific role in facilitating migration.

The importance of strong personal connections for migrants stems from their role in building stable and lasting connections between participants in a context characterised by the vulnerability of living abroad for the first time. These connections also serve to articulate a form of belonging to this transnational space, characterised by expectations of help and mutual support, but also by coercion, with the reputation of the community also resting on the individual's behaviour. Migrants from Baltistan are organised as an association in Kuwait. The association has rented rooms in the city, which are used for migrants' gatherings (and sometimes to perform prayers and minor religious services) and for short-term accommodation (when losing a job or before leaving the country). Each room, a total of seventeen in 2019, is used by migrants from a specific village or area and each member contributes to the rent (renting a room in Kuwait is extremely expensive). Large religious gatherings, such as the celebration of

festivals like Muharram or other preaching activities, take place in the *hussainiyas*. Migrants also visit mosques for prayers. Shared religious belonging by migrants and by the Kuwaiti Shia community helps those migrants to gain access to the latter's resources, mosques, *hussainiyas*, and patronage. Not only the Shias from Baltistan benefit from this access; the entire migrant community from this region of Pakistan is positively affected. Access, however, does not mean access on equal terms. Migrants' access to praying in mosques and attending *hussainiyas* follows different time schedules from those of Kuwaitis. Although migrants have access to the same religious spaces as the national community, this access follows the existing segregation between citizens and non-citizens. Moreover, there are also elements of differentiation related to the structure of Shia Islam that are reproduced by migrant groups. Other community activities include the participation in the cricket league formed by migrants from Baltistan and Kargil, with eleven teams. The cricket league takes place on Fridays for several months and it is part of a larger urban landscape, formed by migrants from other South Asian countries who also play this sport in the open spaces in the city. In this context, as the head of the community mentioned to me, "it is impossible that there is a Balti in Kuwait whom we do not know."

A third aspect that determines this transnational space is its specifically religious dimension, which is exemplified by the role played by religious actors and the practices and activities of migrants in Kuwait. Although migration is the main (economic) activity, there are religious actors (students and sheikhs) who seem to play the role of middlemen owing to their privileged access to religious networks and the entrepreneurial class in the Gulf. These religious actors are part of transnational communities characterised by a high degree of social cohesion.²⁵ Moreover, religious aspects are reinforced by a number of activities and connections. Many Shia migrants work in companies owned by wealthy Shia families, yet these families also employ Sunnis and Nurbaskshis (a minority group distinct from both Shia and Sunni) from Baltistan. Although migrants have access to the same religious spaces as the national community, this access follows the existing segregation between citizens and non-citizens. Moreover, there are also elements of differentiation related to the structure of Shia Islam that are reproduced by migrant groups.

25 Faist, Fauser, and Reisenauer 2013, 14–15.

Belonging to Shia Islam: The grand and the ‘small’ mullahs

Shia Islam is organised around the structure of the *marjaiyya* (the supreme religious authority based in Iran and Iraq) and believers decide which *marja* or grand ayatollah to choose. Grand ayatollahs have their own doctrinal differences and one of these concerns the role of religion in politics.²⁶ Khomeini's defence of an Islamic government (*wilayat al-faqih*) in the 1970s provoked a schism in the religious leadership because other grand ayatollahs, such as Abu al Qasim al-Khoei, and his successor Ali al-Sistani, did not share this view and adopted a more quietist position.²⁷ Further differences have accentuated the fragmented religious landscape, which is characterised by strong competition between the followers of eminent, established religious figures and aspirants. Moreover, this religious landscape, which in principle has no definitive territorial basis, but which is connected to the context in Iran and Iraq, is fully transplanted to the microcosm of Kuwait.²⁸

Migrants in Kuwait, in their condition as followers, become acquainted with this polarised religious context and some of them align with one group or the other. A few migrants I interviewed acknowledged at first that there were no differences between followers of one or another *marja* as all are Shia. However, during our conversations they would state their preferences to regularly attend certain mosques and identify themselves as belonging to a specific group, whether as ‘Shirazis’ (followers of the grand ayatollah Sadiq al-Shirazi, commonly known as *Shiraziyyin*) or as ‘al-Sistani’ (in reference to the grand ayatollah Ali al-Sistani), the latter being probably the most prominent group in Baltistan. In fact, these networks appear to be ordered according to these two *marjaiyya*. Migrants’ positioning in this dynamic religious spectrum of Shia Islam depends on their established relations in Baltistan and seems to be unaffected by the religious scene in the Gulf or the wider spectrum of Shia Islam at large. This is the case of a migrant in his late fifties with whom I met up in 2018 and 2019 in Kuwait. He first moved to Kuwait in 1982 and travelled widely in the region (Iran and Iraq). He identified himself as a Shirazi and articulated his religious belonging in the following way:

Shirazi, Sistani, Khomeini... all of them are the same. All of them do good. Khomeini, now Khamenei, they do well in Iran but they are ‘too much religious’ [emphasis of the author].

²⁶ Louër 2011, 76–79, Rizvi 2018.

²⁷ Rizvi 2018, 175.

²⁸ Louër 2011, 167–76.

There are no differences. Some of them are more open than others. Iran is a developed state (...). In Baltistan some mullahs are very educated such as Sheikh Mohsin, Sheikh Jafari [present imam of the Skardu great mosque, the capital and main city in Baltistan]; they have studied many years abroad in Iran and Iraq and they have seen the world. They are open-minded and they support female education. Other mullahs have no education and they do not know the world. These mullahs, I call them *chhote* mullah [small mullahs], studied a few years but they did not finish their studies. They just wear turbans but there is nothing in their heads. They are constantly saying to people, 'do not do this', 'do not do that'.

This man's understanding of religion as being a Shia can be related to a personal trajectory characterised by relative economic success and access to religious and economic circles in Kuwaiti society, as well as by his experience of having married a stateless woman in Kuwait – born in Iraq as the daughter of a former religious leader from Kargil who left before independence and never returned to this home area – and having children (of Pakistani nationality) raised in a consumerist and modern Gulf society. His views on religion in the context of Baltistan, also found in similar comments made by other migrants, were strongly connected to ideas of progress and modernity, implying a knowledge of broader societal transformations. Notably, he distinguished between those religious leaders in Baltistan educated abroad for many years (and part of broader networks) and those who were educated locally (or with limited international exposure). In any case, he attributed an influential role in guiding the predominantly rural society of Baltistan to those religious leaders with less education. He provided the example that while foreign-educated religious leaders were in favour of female advancement and did not oppose vaccination campaigns, 'small mullahs' did not share these views. Indeed, anti-polio vaccination campaigns in Baltistan and other parts of Pakistan have often raised suspicions among some religious leaders who consider them as a way to spread 'Western' diseases or sterilise the population.

A sense of shared religious belonging is important in this migrant network. This is an element openly acknowledged by migrants, who say that Kuwaiti families from the Shia merchant class are 'helping' them by providing them with jobs. Members of this merchant class, however, do not explicitly refer to a sense of religious shared belonging, but rather reference Islam to explain their commitment to philanthropic activities.²⁹ Kuwaiti families see charity as part of the Islamic precept to share wealth with the less socially advantaged, irrespective of

²⁹ Lacey and Benthall 2014.

their creed.³⁰ Even so, for this Kuwaiti Shia merchant class, an influential minority in the country, the support provided for development activities in Baltistan in the fields of health and education is framed in non-religious, and certainly non-political, terms. The developmental activity carried out in Baltistan, which is articulated and publicised via local information panels on the spot, brochures, and videos, does not mention religion as a field of intervention. During an interview, members of the Marafie family referred to their contribution to the building of mosques, for example, and said that this was a personal contribution which was carried out by other NGOs and that they saw it as separate from their developmental work. To recapitulate, we could agree that the views of both the migrants and the Kuwaiti merchant class on the role of Islam in society contain specific values that can be described as political.

Development assistance from Kuwait in Baltistan: International cooperation or faith solidarity?

The Gulf has a philanthropic tradition of involving the engagement of prominent families from the merchant classes in foreign regions, with which they have traded for centuries. This developmental cooperation abroad is preceded by a tradition of charity work at home that favoured the modernisation of Gulf societies in fields such as health and education.³¹ As in the case of charitable activity from the global North, support for the needy by these actors from the Gulf, mainly in east Africa and South Asia, has often been shaped by religious values and combined with support for religious-specific interventions such as donations to build mosques, contributions to the activities of religious actors, and the boosting of religious education.³²

Developmental work in Baltistan supported by Kuwaiti organisations and individuals is acknowledged, by these organisations themselves and by the migrants from Baltistan, as having both a religious and a not specifically religious dimension in the sense that both fields are identified as separate. These two descriptions are distinguished in ways that show the interplay of religion with modernity and with the question of the often-assumed sectarian identity. In March 2018 I had an interview with members of the Marafie Foundation,

³⁰ Mato Bouzas 2018.

³¹ Crystal 1995, 25; 45.

³² Lacey and Benthall 2014, 1–4.

which is an NGO funded along the lines of the previous philanthropic work by Mohammad Rafie Husain Marafie in Kuwait, an influential family from the country's traditional merchant class. The Marafie Foundation is at present run by the son and other descendants of the Marafie family, therefore it is a family foundation, and concentrates its developmental work abroad, mainly in Pakistan, but also in Iraq, India (the state of Kerala), and China, among other countries.³³ During the interview, they mentioned that their decision to support developmental activity in Baltistan in mid-1987 was connected to their relationship with the preacher Sheikh Hassan Medhiabadi, and the fact that they had travelled to the region to assess the situation. Views about development held by the members of the Marafie expedition to Baltistan differed from those of the sheikh and the local people. In the interview, they spoke about their disagreement on funding a school only for boys and the strong opposition to female education in Baltistan at the time, something which they saw as 'backward'. They did not express this difference in religious terms, however; they only mentioned that the role of the religious leader in the community at the time was not in tune with what religious teachings – according to the religious community of Kuwait – would say about female education. The Marafie justified their disposition as a wealthy family to support the needy on the basis of religious duty (*khoms* and *zakat*). Religion in this case was thus understood as ethics,³⁴ a relationship of the individual in the world as part of a specific context in which religious belonging was not at stake.³⁵ In fact, the Marafie Foundation targets non-Muslims as well, although it is unclear how they select their projects. It seems that this developmental activity is strongly guided by existing personal acquaintances. As other merchant families, the Marafie also support religious specific interventions, such as the building and restructuring of mosques, but this is channelled through other charities and the Marafie Foundation is not involved in these specific actions.

The Marafie Foundation in Baltistan mainly deals with infrastructure – schools, dispensaries, etc. – functioning alone or in partnership with the government of Pakistan (which provides, for example, the teachers and the material for the schools). The work of this NGO is different from the AKRSP, the largest NGO in the region, in scope and orientation. The Marafie Foundation is limited to the specific fields of health and education, and is only involved in providing infrastructure and specific actions, such as bringing doctors to operate in a

³³ See www.marafiefoundation.org.

³⁴ Lynch 2014.

³⁵ On giving as an individual obligation, see Lowi 2017, 568–69.

hospital in the summer, providing sums of money for families caring for orphan children, etc. It is too early to observe if their activities can be sustained over time because some more fieldwork is needed to understand the scope of their developmental activity. Compared to the AKRSP, which draws its employees from the regionally educated intelligentsia of Gilgit-Baltistan, the Marafie Foundation relies more on local networks in Baltistan, sometimes connected to specific families. In sum, the Marafie do not see their philanthropic activity as religiously oriented, although it is guided by religious principles, and they distinguish their religious specific interventions – which they support through outsourcing funds to other NGOs and through donations to religious actors – from their non-religious developmental work.

Nevertheless, some migrants see the activities of the Marafie Foundation as having something to do with religion. A young semi-skilled worker in Kuwait, probably in his early thirties, described to me his plan to set up a small NGO in Baltistan with other migrant friends upon their return to the region. He explained very detailed aspects that showed his social commitment, unlike comments I had often heard from other migrants when I mentioned my interest in knowing about how migrants contribute to development. As there were already many NGOs in Baltistan, I asked him about the difference between his project and others at work, such as the Marafie Foundation. He answered: “We are not doing religion”. On hearing this, I asked him to explain his words. Unlike the Marafie, he and his friends wanted to do ‘small work’, that is, to use petty money to help poor people to buy medicine, no matter what their religion was or where (which village) they came from in Baltistan. In his view, the Marafie Foundation had a religious orientation that favoured the Twelver Shia over other groups and, although he was himself part of that community, he said that the culture in Baltistan was ‘different’. He claimed that, with his project, he wanted to support poor people, irrespective of their religious affiliation, because this was more reflective of society in Baltistan. Other migrants expressed similar opinions, underlining a gap between the apparently religiously-driven focus of developmental work and a home society that, in their view, does not need such a religious orientation, at least from the perspective of the low- to middle-income families to which the migrants belong.

The views mentioned during the interview with the Marafie family and this migrant (shared by a few other members of the community that I met with) show that there is no consensus on what is religious or non-religious in the transnational developmental field under study. There is, however, a shared perception, often implicit but other times explicit, that belonging to the same branch of Islam plays a crucial role in participation in this transnational space

and can facilitate access to resources. At the same time, religion is perceived by those participating in this network as a quite organised affair, that is, as one that follows certain procedures – in fundraising and financial obligations – and that considers certain practices as universal. However, what is perceived as neutral in religious terms by some members of the network – such as the Marafie Foundation, the religious leaders, and a section of the migrant community – may not be shared by others, such as the migrant (himself a Shia) mentioned above. This differentiation shows, on the one hand, that when we investigate religion as an empirical object of research, we are implicitly limiting the scope of religion, a fact not shared by believers. On the other hand, we observe that members of these majority Muslim societies (in this case, the Shia majority society of north-eastern Baltistan) also place religion in a certain context or sphere. For the latter, religion can be connected to the activities of actors and organisations, as organised religion, but not necessarily extended to the rest of the society.

The role of religion in transnational spaces: Some final considerations

The analysis of the role of religion in the transnational space formed by migration and development networks from north-eastern Pakistan and Kuwait shows how the religious question is mainly framed in hegemonic terms (whose religion?). Despite sharing the same religious belonging, religion, when associated with developmental activities, is perceived by migrants from Baltistan as something external to their own religious (or for that matter, multi-religious) context. In other words, religion as a link to developmental activities is seen as introducing a differentiating character in that society. Religion in this sense can be seen as a form of spatial organisation that emerges from above (or from outside) and is distinct from existing forms of local organisation that are also seen as religious by the society. This understanding differs from the study of religion in post-secular (developed in economic terms) contexts, which, as Bader points out, should be framed as a debate about liberal-democratic constitutionalism. Assuming that Western developed societies have not been fully secularised, one can equally consider that other societies with a religious definition of the state have never been fully religious.

Although religion in this transnational space refers to ‘organised religion’, in the sense of a line of action in which religion grasps the all-encompassing

field of the social, this does not mean, as some migrants asserted by questioning this religion ‘from above’, that religion should be placed in the sphere of the individual, in the sense of one’s own behaviour and understanding of the world. On the contrary, migrants sense that their own religiosity does not lead them to categorise human beings by religion. In this context, religion amounts to a form of ethics. The role of religion in the context of Kuwait (and the Gulf in general) sponsored development activities in Baltistan is perceived as critical in an existing religiously plural society. In this view, religion, when associated with developmental activities, is acknowledged as essentially ordering because it (through developmental activities) redraws the boundaries of the religious community (Shia Islam). Although it is not possible to speak of the existence of religious pluralism in those societies, there are forms of social organisation that do not follow religious lines, and religion is sometimes understood in a more ‘flexible’ context than that described in many academic writings about these societies. In other words: What is understood as religious depends very much on how and which questions are being asked about the subject.

Members of the Kuwaiti merchant class who support development activities in Baltistan operate by following a sense of religious duty. They claim, at least in the case of the Marafie Foundation, that they do not discriminate on religious grounds while doing their development work. They fund non-religious, or religiously neutral, interventions (such as building a health clinic, bringing doctors to the region under medical campaigns), but they also support the religious and charity work of religious actors, such as the sheikhs. Through this development activity, the role of these religious actors as benefactors in Baltistan’s society is reinforced. These interventions comply with the general regulations of the Government of Pakistan, which is an Islamic republic. While this support is perceived by the donors and recipients as a form of solidarity, outsiders to this network, as well as some migrants, maintain that this aid is linked to geopolitical issues.

Developmental cooperation generally has an altruistic element when it is not completely driven by political aims, but it certainly has political consequences most of the time. In the sectarianised spectrum of the Gulf, and in that of Pakistan, the fact that this transnational space is predominantly constituted by actors belonging to Shia Islam raises many questions about the very nature of its functioning. In Shia Islam, personal relations in a decentralised context play an important role through the *marjaiyya* system and these networks seem to be related to the al-Shirazi and al-Sistani groups. Religious actors have access to resources and, depending on this access, may become influential community leaders. Their role, however, is not limited to the religious sphere, because even

when these actors advocate for the view that religion should not play a political role – as some trends in Shia Islam indicate – they are still making a political statement. Development and migration networks between north-eastern Pakistan and Kuwait thus share a ‘Shia character’ in the sense that ideas and practices of Shia Islam are part of this transnational space. Yet, these religious ideas and practices are not always easy to differentiate from a specific socioeconomic, political, or cultural context such as those of Kuwait and Baltistan. In other words, the role of the religious in transnational spaces cannot be understood without paying attention to the power hierarchies in which religion is inscribed. Religion can be seen as a form of solidarity by some of the participating actors, but also as something potentially divisive by others.

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A Material Geography of ‘Dubai Business’

Making and Re-Making Muslim Worlds across Central Asia and the Gulf

Abstract: Tracing the circulation of Korans donated by Saudi Arabia across multiple migratory contexts in the United Arab Emirates, Tajikistan, and beyond, and understanding their transfiguration from a sacred text into a prestigious consumer good, this chapter explores the materialities and immaterialities of Tajik migrant religious, economic and social worlds that meet and intertwine in the context of ‘Dubai business’. Giving impetus to a stronger consideration of the material turn in the research on translocality and transregionality, the chapter illustrates how cultural imaginaries, while travelling via prestigious commodities across geographical regions, and socio-economic contexts mesh with spatial ideas of urbanism, cosmopolitanism, and piety. In the worlds of Dubai’s transregional trading business, tourism and charity, an exclusive notion of ‘bourgeois Islam’ is fabricated – a contested assemblage of knowledge, lifestyle aspirations, cultural hegemony, and social distinctedness, through which Tajik migrants re-fashion an elitist Muslim self along different notions of mobility, work and belonging.

Charitable gifts that *matter*: Korans donated by Saudi Arabia

Twenty-nine-year-old Maruf from Dushanbe was working as a sales manager for men’s fashion in a medium-sized shopping mall in Dubai when we met in winter 2013. Since his employment contract was linked to a multi-year residence permit, Maruf was able to buy an apartment for his wife and two children in the neighbouring emirate of Sharjah, which he shared with his older brother and his family. Maruf arrived much too late and visibly annoyed for our lunch meeting in a Persian restaurant near his office, where I had been waiting for him for quite some time. Looking stressed, he welcomed me with the words “Unfortunately, I can’t stay long either”, while simultaneously waving at the waiter for the order and starting to complain about the working conditions at his workplace: “We employees are not treated fairly. We always have to work longer

than agreed in the contract and have far too few breaks. But he can do this to us, he is the boss”, he explains and – after a short hesitation – adds: “He is Arab!”. While we wait for our *palav-i shīrīn*, a Persian-style sweet rice dish with chicken, his favourite one in the restaurant, he digs around in a big and heavy bag under the table and hands me two copies of the Koran he brought from the *awqāf*-centre¹ (religious endowments) in Dubai, which he visits regularly to take Koranic lessons and receive advice on religious questions. The book is a beautiful, golden decorated, high-quality edition entailing a parallel German translation and published by the King-Fahd-complex in Medina, Saudi Arabia.² Heavy in my hand, the Koran obviously mattered, as it caused a change of mood in Maruf. Still annoyed about the feeling of superiority that resonates in the ‘Arabness’ his boss displays at the workplace, Maruf, while looking at the Koran in my hand, begins to tell me with enthusiasm about the philanthropic spirit in the centre. For him, the generosity he experienced in the centre stands in sharp contrast to the narrow framework within which the secular Tajik state is willing to serve the religious needs and sensibilities of its Muslim citizens. Praising the variety of different Koran translations that are freely distributed there – even in Russian – Maruf directs my attention to the special aesthetics of the edition that he had just given me: “What a great edition! Praise be to Allah! You can look for such editions in Tajikistan for a long time, right?”. “What are you going to do with the other Koran copies in your bag”, I ask him, and add “Do these copies also contain translations?”, “Yes, in Russian. They are for my brother”, is Maruf’s answer, “He is going to Moscow next week, for his business”.

As this small and rather random episode from my multi-sited field research in the United Arab Emirates (henceforth UAE) and Tajikistan in 2013 and 2014 shows, Korans donated by the Saudi royal family (henceforth: Saudi-donated Korans) travel as much as Maruf and his brother do. Moreover, both migrants and Korans share social lives, that are interwoven, translocal and, as such, marked by mobility, multiplicity, transition and circulation in and across the multiple and intersecting worlds of what this chapter is about, and what I analytically determine as ‘Dubai business’. In Arabic language or provided with a

¹ *Awqāf*, the plural of the Arabic term *waqf*, designates charitable endowments that operate under Islamic law. While Gulf charities cover a wide range of philanthropic activities run by a multitude of state- and non-state organisations and private actors, the majority of charitable endowments Tajik migrant visit in Dubai are assigned to *The General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments* (GAIAE), a legal authority close to the government. The emirate of Dubai alone actually runs 700 registered *awqāf*-centres.

² The King-Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Koran produces 10 Million copies per year and translates the Koran in 39 different languages.

Russian translation, Saudi-donated Korans travel from Dubai's multiple charitable foundations (*awqāf*), which are regularly visited by Tajik migrants for various religious services, into the apartments of Tajik migrant families residing in the UAE. There, they are used for daily prayers and family rituals. Korans of this kind can also be found in the bookshelves of the neighbourhood mosques in Dubai or other parts of UAE, where I accompanied Tajik migrant women to Koranic recitation (*tajwīd*) circles. Moreover, Saudi-donated Korans were shared in migrant accommodations, where many male bachelor Tajiks live temporarily and get to know their future business partners in the fur coat trade and tourism business. I also encountered Korans of this type in fur coat show rooms in Dubai, in which Tajiks worked as managers and were involved in *da'wa*³ activities among their business partners. Besides, Saudi-donated Koran copies also cross nation-state borders. At the time of my fieldwork, they were part of the ritual equipment of so-called 'Arab mosques', sponsored by rich Dubai businessmen especially in rural regions of Tajikistan. Eventually, Saudi-donated Korans entered migrant households in Tajikistan; as prestigious souvenirs, gifts, and as religious objects whose semiotic power and aesthetics fire the social imagination about the 'Dubai business' as a notion for economic success, religious progress and social mobility.

'Dubai business'

In post-soviet Tajikistan, migration has become a way of life that integrates Tajik Muslims as creative and mobile actors in processes of economic and cultural globalisation. Labour migration to Russia is still the dominant livelihood strategy in the country. However, since the 1990s, the Gulf has developed as an alternative migration destination for Tajiks. Like Maruf and his older brother, those Tajiks who were able to establish themselves in the field of 'Dubai business' in the 2010s formed a small group of university-trained, urbanely socialised, multilingual and religiously aspirated younger and middle-aged Tajiks driven by their aspiration to pursue Islamic life projects in a Muslim country abroad.⁴ A religious revivalism, which has affected Tajikistan since the 1980s

3 "Calling to Islam" or "Calling to God" is a central component of Islamic mission directed at non-Muslims as well as Muslims. At the core of religious programmes of modern Muslim revitalisation movements, *da'wa* is especially directed at Muslims to turn back to God and to orientate one's life according to Islamic principles.

4 Stephan-Emmrich 2017a, Stephan-Emmrich 2017b.

and then especially after independence, brought about a stronger orientation towards the wider Muslim world, particularly to the Near and Middle East. The increase in religiously motivated work and study migration, tourism and pilgrimage, particularly to places in the Arab world, confirms established sacred geographies that places ex-Soviet Tajik Muslims at the periphery of the Muslim world. Meanwhile, the model of Gulf urbanism that materialises in circulating spectacular media images, high-prestige commodity goods, migrants' narratives and that is being carried to Tajikistan via infrastructural investments, had brought about a reconfiguration of space, spatial narratives and social imagination.⁵ Accordingly, in Tajikistan, Dubai has become a preferential migrant destination not only as a new regional hub in the Gulf with geographical proximity to Mecca, the major pilgrimage destination for Hajj and Umrah. In migrant narratives Dubai has also become a trope for a 'Muslim-cum-business-friendly-place' that flourishes due to an Islamic form of governance and aristocratic leadership that promotes social justice, as well as Sharia-compliant economic activities that are corruption-free, and allows for combining work and piety.

Followed by the lure of the Gulf boom that reached Tajikistan in the early 2000s, Maruf and his brother got involved in the 'Dubai business', hoping to combine their desire for economic success with spiritual and moral progress and social upward mobility. With Maruf's employment in retail and his brother's combined work as both a manager in an SUV car showroom in the emirate of Ajman and as a middleman in an auto parts business that spanned Dubai, Dushanbe, Moscow and Istanbul, the brothers found their place in the complex, exclusive and volatile socio-economic worlds of the 'Dubai business'. While Gulf migration opened up many worlds of work and business for them (formal and informal, trade, tourism, retail), it simultaneously created a new horizon for the two brothers to imagine being and becoming a better Muslim, as well as to strive for a 'good Muslim life'.

This chapter employs the term 'Dubai business' to analytically grasp the complex and entangled relationship of people, things, ideas and places and the multiple economic, social and religious worlds, in which these entangled relationships are embedded. Thus, the analytical scope of the term is multifold: While the term encompasses the place where Tajiks go to find work, as well as the type of work they pursue there, it also speaks to the market mechanisms of place-branding in which Tajik migrants are involved. As business is done not only *in* but also *with* Dubai, Dubai is being transformed into a brand that is sold and consumed in and outside the emirate. In addition, and in a more metaphor-

5 Mirzoev and Stephan-Emmrich 2016.

ical sense, the term has the capacity “to refigure a larger conceptual field, to bring material (social) and mental worlds into closer conjunction”,⁶ as well as connecting compartmentalised fields of knowledge in area studies, anthropology and migration studies. A dynamic time-space configuration of material and immaterial flows, transfers and transformations, ‘Dubai business’ conflates labour migration, continental and maritime trade in luxury goods such as fur coats, SUV cars or smartphones with the fields of Russian middle-class tourism, Muslim pilgrimage, Islamic education and Gulf charity. In this quality, I understand ‘Dubai business’ as providing “a transregional platform” of connectivity, interaction and exchange that is dynamic and “intermediate in scale”.⁷ This platform assembles a plurality of actors, practices, places, things, ideas, identities, and multiple worlds across Central Asia, China, South Asia, Europe and the Near and Middle East. ‘Dubai business’, however, also encompasses social reality, human experience and the inhabiting of migrant lifeworlds – all are shaped by the resonance and mutual relationship of neoliberal capitalism and Muslim piety.⁸ Like Dubai itself, it is a production site for migrant hopes, middle-class dreams and aspirations, for emotional attachment and elusive belongings. In the multiple worlds of ‘Dubai business’, an exclusive notion of ‘bourgeois Islam’ is fabricated – an assemblage of movement, social imaginaries, and experiences that offer migrants a resource for reshaping the self along various notions of migration, work, and belonging.

Tracing the circulation of Saudi-donated Korans across multiple places in the UAE and Tajikistan, as well as understanding their transfiguration from a sacred text into a prestigious consumer good, this chapter explores the material reality of migrant religious, economic, and social worlds that meet and intertwine in the context of the ‘Dubai business’. In addition, the chapter aims to provide an impetus for greater consideration of the material turn in the research on translocality and transregionality, showing how religious imaginaries travel within and across geographical regions and different migratory contexts, and how these ‘immaterialities’ intertwine with notions of place, modernity, progress, future, and the pious Muslim self.

⁶ Daniels 2011, 182.

⁷ Ho 2014, 888.

⁸ Atia 2012, Tobin 2016, Schielke 2015.

Exploring Muslim worlds through mobile things: Connectivity, mediation, transition

In the context of transregional questions, research into the mobility of material objects is beginning to gain importance, albeit slowly at the moment.⁹ Following the trajectories of Saudi-donated Korans and their ‘social, yet mobile, lives’¹⁰ through practices of gift exchange, consumption, usage, collection and representation, the focus of this chapter moves beyond Korans as things themselves, to the multiple Muslim worlds and world-making processes these religious objects co-shape and that span distances across places, regions and continents. Thus, attention is given to the interconnectivity and co-constitution of Korans as things, their materialities and geographies, with the places and spaces they move through, and the religious ideas they carry with them.

Integrating the material turn into area studies allows for a differentiated understanding of ‘Muslim worlds’, their plurality, and their making and re-making, that links spatial notions of ‘area’, ‘region’, or ‘*trans*-region’ with phenomenological notions of ‘everydayness’ and ‘lifeworlds’. Both concepts draw attention to “the paradox of plurality and the ambiguity of intersubjective life”¹¹ that shapes the lived experience and their existential significance for migrants and other actors. Meanwhile, the question of how migrant lived experiences and the knowledge whereby migrants live an everyday life that is “plural, complex, and essentially unsystematic [in] nature”,¹² can be *empirically* grasped is also relevant for the ‘Dubai business’ as a social reality. Being fluid and elastic, transregional entities cannot be fixed. They have no clear and continuing boundaries and ‘keep slipping away’ when explored.¹³ Such a combined understanding of Muslim worlds complicates any neat compartmentalising of historiographical and geographical categories, as it also demands a transregional methodology that produces ethnographies which are “thick, socially and historically”.¹⁴ Back to the materiality, sensuous presence, aesthetic dimension and mobility of ‘things’, Saudi-donated Korans *matter*, as argued in the chapter’s methodological intervention, as they allow to link spatial and existential ap-

⁹ Juneja 2019, Ho 2014.

¹⁰ Appadurai 1996.

¹¹ Jackson 2013, 9.

¹² Schielke and Debevec 2012, 3.

¹³ Verne 2019, 85.

¹⁴ Ho 2014, 885.

proaches to explore multiple Muslim worlds through the three conceptual lenses of 'connectivity', 'mediation', and 'transition'.

Firstly, the term 'connectivity', with its processual, transformative dimension, is preferred to the more static term 'connection' in order to "focus on entanglements, spaces of transactions and translations, as well as on the 'brokers' that operate in therein, thus actively shaping, as well as being shaped by connections".¹⁵ Tajiks act in different ways as brokers within and between the multiple worlds of 'Dubai business'. In economic terms, in their position as middlemen they link different business fields (trade and tourism), while in cultural terms, Tajiks rely on multi-lingual competencies and cosmopolitan orientations to be mobile within and across – and thus connect – different worlds, that is the Arabophone and Persophone worlds of trade and business with the Russophone world of tourism and conspicuous consumption.

Secondly, according to Verne,¹⁶ transregional entities like the 'Dubai business', although they cannot be fixed, have effects that can be experienced (and empirically researched) in human and non-human relationships, places, practices, and migrants' senses of self. As such, effects are materially mediated, for example through things that act as medium. Following Meyer and Houtman¹⁷ in their plea for rematerialising scholarly approaches to religion, things such as Saudi-donated Korans are "instances and instantiations of the 'everyday'". Their materiality forms the "texture of lived, embodied experience". Moreover, visible and tangible, things both form and mediate the living and enabling conditions of "the religious".¹⁸ Since media rely on indexicality to produce symbolic representations, religion and religious experience cannot be analysed "outside the forms and practices of its mediation".¹⁹ Even more so, "the modes of mediation are part of the religion's configuration".²⁰

Thirdly, migration is a transformative process providing symbolic capital as well as promoting multiple forms of change.²¹ Just as Tajiks' religious experience and their Muslim self are re-configured in the context of 'Dubai business', the Saudi-donated Korans and their material properties need to be thought through their transformative states, as they "transform, mutate, morph, and

¹⁵ Brosius and Pfaff-Czarnecka 2019, 5.

¹⁶ Verne 2019, 85.

¹⁷ Meyer and Houtman 2012.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

¹⁹ Meyer and Moors 2006, 7.

²⁰ Lundby 2013, xii.

²¹ Salazar 2018, 6ff.

thus continue in dynamic circulations”.²² Accordingly, the concept of transition emphasises Tajik migrants’ creativity and potentiality to re-shape and re-create the social and material world they live in,²³ as it allows to “unravel the processes of transformation and reconfiguration” that take place in the multiple contexts (worlds) of ‘Dubai business’, and that “interrupt existing matrices of geography and aesthetic practice”.²⁴

A tense homeness: Migrant accommodations

Entry into the multiple worlds of Dubai’s trading and tourism business happens in the private migrant apartments or low-budget hostels in the Creek area, where Tajik migrants mostly reside and share rooms with Sunni Iranians, Afghans, and sometimes also Arab migrants. Operated and managed by members of Dubai’s Afghan diaspora, which has successfully positioned itself in the real estate market, Tajiks appreciate these accommodations for the cultural ‘nestedness’ they experience there. Equipped with an Afghan janitor who takes care of the security of the migrants’ private belongings and is often also the cook who prepares a culturally familiar hot meal once a day, Afghan migrant apartments or hostels create trust and provide a sense of home. As an exclusive Muslim space, migrant accommodations foster conviviality and friendship, and they provide a platform for building business relations. By sharing their living space with Afghan, Baluch and Sunni Persian-speaking traders, brokers and business professionals, Tajiks gain access to established commercial networks in the luxury car, spare part, mobile phone or jewellery trade businesses. They are thus able to expand their business networks in Dubai beyond ethnic networks bases on kinship, peer-group (in Tajik *hamsinf*, *hamkurs*), or neighbourhood affiliation (in Tajik *hamsāya*). This interweaving of life and work is articulated in the statement “We prefer to stay with Iranian or Afghan guys, as we are one family. We speak the same language, we trust each other, we are brothers that share not only living space but also our businesses”. Thus, Tajiks cultivate a sense of ‘Persianness’, which is also articulated in the preference for Afghan and Iranian restaurants. Associated with this ‘Persianness’ is a repertoire of cultural knowledge, experience, and imagination that Tajiks draw on to mediate

²² Tolia-Kelly 2013, 157.

²³ Kalir 2018, 350.

²⁴ Juneja 2019, 24–25.

creatively between different business worlds (tourism and trading business) as economic middle-men or to be mobile as brokers in transcultural contexts.²⁵ In this intermediary role, Tajiks connect to the cosmopolitan trade networks in the Persian Gulf, and thus to a world that links Muslims, markets, and households across the Gulf, the broader Near and Middle East, South, Central, and East Asia, and Eurasia through a complex set of knowledge, skill, work ethics, and social relationship.²⁶

Tajiks' notion of the Ummah as a business community emphasises moments of equality, solidarity, and the sharing of a common set of cultural knowledge and practices. When Tajiks act out their 'Persianness' as a cultural consciousness articulated in terms of language practices and cosmopolitan lifestyles, they transcend local, national, and regional identifications that assign them the status as 'peripheral' Muslims (in the rigid secular environment at home, in majority Turkic-speaking Central Asia, and in the wider Muslim world). Such post-national narratives of sharing and belonging, however, obscure the plurality and difference of the Muslim worlds Tajik co-make, appropriate, and cohabit. With their preference for Afghan and Sunni-Iranian roommates, Tajiks in Dubai articulate their refusal to live or do business with Turkish-speaking Muslims from Central Asia and the Caucasus, and even with Tajiks from Uzbekistan. Due to differences in language, cultural traditions and the history of mobility and migration that connect other Muslims in Central Asia with Dubai, Uzbeks and Kyrgyz migrants make their own business worlds in Dubai, based on transregionally operating Turkophone trading and migration networks.

Differences can also be found within the Persian-speaking business community itself. The following episode shows how difference materialises in hierarchical business relationships. Lunch at the accommodation, which is included in the monthly rent Tajik migrants pay to the Afghan owner, is the only time of the day when all roommates get together to eat, socialise, and relax. Once, I was invited by two Tajik street brokers to join them for lunch with their roommates. After the meal, when tea and cake were served, we remained sitting and talked with two Baluchi car dealers and an Iranian mobile phone shop owner. After lunch, the conversation sluggishly shifted from family and business matters, food prices in local supermarkets to the politic situation at home, and then moved on to religious matters. When the conversation switched to questions about Sharia-compliant work, the Iranian roommate named Iskandar got up, brought a copy of the Koran, which looked similar to the one Maruf had brought

²⁵ Mirzoev and Stephan-Emmrich 2018, 104–14.

²⁶ Marsden 2016.

for me from his favourite endowment, and spontaneously started to engage in *da'wa*. After we followed Iskandar's speech for a while, one of the two Tajik brokers apologised politely and left the room as inconspicuously as possible. Later he explained to me, "He (Iskandar) does *da'wa* all the time. It is a deed of merit (in Tajik *kār-i savāb*) and he speaks well, but I can't always bear it, because he uses *da'wa* to praise Iranian civilization. In Islam, all Muslims are equal, Iranians are not superior. But he is my business partner, I depend on him. So, I ain't saying nothing, [and] just leave the room".

While Iranians and Afghans cultivate a cultural and religious superiority, Tajiks are assigned the inferior position of 'the little brother'. Due to the Soviet past, Tajiks are perceived by their roommates as insufficiently educated in both religion and the history of Iranian culture and civilization, as they were largely cut off from Islamic discourse, religious knowledge flows and cultural education over a long period of time. Accordingly, Koran copies such as those sponsored by Saudi Arabia and available in Dubai's many charitable endowments, when used, or when circulating within migrant accommodations, pass mainly from Iranian and Afghan roommates to the new Tajik business partners, and not vice versa. Used for *da'wa*, or in the gift economy of Muslim charity, Koran donations 'sign' an a-symmetric business relationship that translate Tajiks' subordinate position as economic newcomers and peripheral Muslims to the 'Dubai business' into their position of learners in religious matters.

Muslim elitism: Doing *da'wa* at the workplace

The multiple ways in which religion intersects with Dubai's business worlds can be further traced through the way Tajik migrants themselves use Saudi-sponsored Koran copies for *da'wa* activities at the workplace. One of the two Tajik brokers who invited me to join lunch in their accommodation works for fellow-countrymen Bahodir, a and manager of a fur coat show room at the time we met. Fluent in Russian and Arabic, Bahodir held a mediating position between Russian clients, the Afghan shop owner and his Emirati sponsor (*kafil*), as he often operated as a translator between the two. He also supervised the Tajik street brokers attracting tourists to visit the fur coat shop. Additionally, to bridge the time between client visits, his management duties and that of the street broker's supervision, Bahodir run his own transregional trading business with care spare parts, in which partners in Dubai, Tajikistan and Russia were involved.

On the day I visit him in his shop, there is not much going on. We drink tea, he shows me the latest collection of furs, and while we wait for customers, a Tajik enters the room, whom he calls his business partner. He is a surgeon who emigrated to Russia from his neighbourhood in Dushanbe in the early 1990s. He regularly comes to Dubai for holidays and meetings with his business partners. Lounging in the representative black leather armchairs, in which Bahodir usually holds his customer conversations, and drinking tea, the two men first discuss the prices of car spare parts in Russia, Dubai and China, before the surgeon asks Bahodir for religious advice. His son wants to do a job pleasing God in Russia and asks Bahodir what the criteria are for his decision. As the conversation draws to a close, Bahodir goes to the desk, takes two copies of the Koran, decorated with gold, out of the drawer and hands them over to his partner, who stows the books in his bag and leaves. Some days later, when visiting Bahodir again, I found him behind his desk involved in the religious instruction of some newly arrived migrants from Tajikistan, who were sitting around his desk listening to him. What I immediately noticed was, that he recited from a Koran of the same type that he had given to his partner from Russia a few days earlier. Strikingly, the semiotics of the prestigious religious object Bahodir used for *da'wa* not only confirmed his religious authority, which he gained through his studies of Islamic law (*fiqh*) at al-Azhar university, but was also expressed in the honorific title *shaykh*. As we will see later, it is the aesthetic authority of Saudi-donated Korans, through which Tajik newcomers are integrated into Dubai's business worlds, inculcated with work ethics based on Islamic principles and equipped with a cultural repertoire that allows them to position themselves in Dubai's superdiverse migrant world. Simultaneously, prestigious religious objects that travel between Dubai, Russia, and also Tajikistan, materially mediate the appreciation and affirmation of transregional business relations. Thus, migrant networks also provide an infrastructure for the circulation of religious ideas; here a Muslim elitism that builds on the idea of being part of Dubai as a regional hub, where lived realities of a religious economy in the trading and tourism business intersect with representative and spatial politics of urban hypermodernity.

An elitist notion inherent to Tajiks' self-understanding as Muslim businesspeople is also articulated through statements such as "We are businesspeople, not migrants!"²⁷ Such positioning points to the strong socio-economic and cultural differentiation within the Tajik migrant community, but also from Central Asian and other Asian migrant communities in the Gulf, along the lines of eth-

27 Stephan-Emmrich 2017a, 279.

nicity, race, religion, class, and the valuation of migrant work. Such elitist self-positioning goes hand in hand with specific translocal lifestyles and a new publicly displayed piety. Cultivating specific housing and eating practices in Dubai and Tajikistan, preferring particular Muslim fashion styles, consuming religious tourism offers to Saudi Arabia, or using prestigious religious signs such as Saudi-donated Korans or Arab language styles, Tajik migrants both in Dubai and at home participate in globalising discourses on the 'right' and 'authentic Islam', which are central to the cultivation of new Muslim middle-class sensibilities in wider Asia.²⁸ With their identity as Muslim businessmen, Tajik middlemen distinguish themselves from the new generation of unskilled, educationally disadvantaged rural migrants (in Russian *migranty*)²⁹ from their home country who, due to their lack of business knowledge, urban skills and experiences of working in convoluted economic fields in a superdiverse urban environment abroad, are perceived as a threat to the good reputation Tajiks enjoy with their Afghan and Iranian business partners in Dubai.

Tajiks' self-fashioning as businesspeople also draws a distinction from Indian, Pakistani and other Asian migrants in Dubai, who work under precarious conditions in the low-wage sector.³⁰ Jobs as hotel employees, street cleaners, construction workers, laundry boys, or porters at the Dubai Creek harbour, were considered inferior and "dirty work" (in Tajik *kār-i nāpāk*) because of the migrants' dependence on the *kafāla* sponsorship system, and thus their vulnerability as economic actors. In contrast, the 'Dubai business' offers great flexibility to move between informal and formal work, to be mobile 'under the radar' of the emirate's strict migration policy, and to realise social careers.

The strong emphasis on an exclusive Muslimness coincides with the striking invisibility of Tajiks in Dubai's public space and goes in line with their rejection or even denial of any form of publicly displayed 'Tajikness'. This stands in sharp contrast to Russia, where Tajik migrants run numerous ethnic restaurants and thus co-shape the urban landscape, and further to Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Uyghurs and Tatars, who run restaurants and bistros in the Dubai Greek area. Since the other ethnic groups from Central Asia and the Caucasus are newcomers in Dubai to the same extent as Tajiks are, the desired invisibility is rather explained by a transnational migration regime based on political mechanisms

²⁸ Thimm 2018, Lücking and Eliyanah 2017, among others.

²⁹ Tajiks in Dubai prefer the Russian term *migranty* when describing their inferior status and the related negative experiences they face with the racial migration regime in Russia as migrants from Central Asia, and particularly from Tajikistan.

³⁰ See for example Laavanya Kathiravelu's monograph *Migrant Dubai* (2016).

of racial profiling and discrimination, that has a strong impact on Tajiks' self-perception as 'second-class' Muslims, citizens and migrants. Performative affiliations via religion, which, as seen, are always multiple, can thus be interpreted as an attempt to overcome this peripheral and negatively connoted sociocultural position. This is reflected not only in the decision of many Tajik street broker in Dubai to wear Arabic clothing but also in the refusal to speak Tajik with me, favouring English or Arabic.

Fostering hegemony: Dubai's charitable endowments (*awqāf*)

Meanwhile, Tajik migrants' re-positioning and re-configuring as 'peripheral' Muslims cannot be understood without considering the material and immaterial circulations that take place in the field of Gulf charities in and beyond the UAE. This goes in particular for the sense of 'Arabness' displayed by Tajik migrants and the cultural and political hegemony that is fostered through this performative concept of elusive belonging. Like other states in the Gulf, the UAE have dispensed their charitable activities in parallel with Western humanitarianism and therewith gain a significant share in the modern expansion of Islamic philanthropy made possible by the oil boom in late 20th century.³¹ This becomes obvious in the 700 existing religious endowments in Dubai, that were frequently visited by Tajik migrants for the purpose of religious education and counselling. Through these endowments, The General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments (GAIAE)³² promotes multiple philanthropic projects to increase religious awareness, spreading Islamic culture, and developing mosques and Koranic centres.³³ When Tajiks visit charitable endowments in Dubai to ask for religious guidance or take Koranic recitation classes there, they simultaneously consume the endowments' core values, such as belonging to the nation, or loyalty to the ruler.

³¹ Lacey and Benthall 2014, 1.

³² The General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments (GAIAE) is a strategic platform for sustainable endowment (*awqāf*) development. GAIAE was issued by the UAE president in 2006 and operates as an independent legal authority. Besides its crucial role in providing and maintaining religious infrastructure, supporting Islamic affairs and piety, the *awqāf*-System in the UAE holds a crucial role in development, particularly in the social, health, education and humanitarian sectors.

³³ <https://www.awqaf.gov.ae/ar/Pages/default.aspx>, accessed April 30, 2021.

Moreover, the endowments offer the otherwise rare opportunity for Tajiks to socialise with Arab Muslims. These encounters produce highly ambivalent notions of 'Arabness'. At the same time, they confirm a hierarchical relationship between the two groups that builds on a religiously superior status of Arabs who are perceived by Tajiks as 'better Muslims' due to their proficiency in Arabic as a sacred language. Besides, the exotic image that Tajiks have among Arab Muslims in Dubai as 'ignorant ex-Soviet Muslims' makes them a sought-after target group for missionary work (*da'wa*). In Maruf's words: "When you go back home from Dubai, you are a religious person (in Tajik *dindār*). The knowledge about our religion is literally lying around on the streets here. As former Soviet Muslims we have an exotic status here. Because our religious education is so poor, we get free lessons everywhere, at the workplace, at the market, in the endowments". However, encounters with Arabs are shaped by ignorance and stereotyping on both sides. Visits to charitable endowments are often accompanied by uncertainty when Tajiks are identified by Arab staff as Shiite Muslims because of their Persian first names, such as Firdaus, Mahdi, Irfan and others.

But Dubai's pious endowments also provide a space to experience moments of sameness. Against the background of a booming Muslim volunteer service in the region, Gulf charity co-produces a mobile, cosmopolitan class of aid workers.³⁴ Tajiks in the 'Dubai business' share with Arab and other Muslim volunteers working in Dubai's endowments the spirit of 'pious neoliberalism' in the new Middle East middle classes that drives them to pursue Islamic life projects that conflate economic rationales, professional careers, and upward social mobility with the pursuit of spiritual advancement, moral self-perfection, and piety.³⁵

As circulating charitable gifts, Koran copies matter here in two ways. Firstly, they involve Tajiks in commoditised social relations as they are reinforced in the context of Gulf charities. In their quality as prestigious goods, or "inalienable possessions",³⁶ Saudi-donated Korans, when given as a pious donation, enable the construction and overcoming of hierarchy by establishing a source of lasting social difference.³⁷ Accordingly, Korans are things endowed with symbolic power that cannot be separated from their owners. Through the act of donation, Korans are transfigured from a sacred text into an ambiguous commodity that points to the antagonistic structure inherent in its function as a gift,

³⁴ Li 2014, 379.

³⁵ Atia 2012, 811ff; 816ff.

³⁶ Weiner 1992.

³⁷ Mills 2004, 240.

forcing the recipient to “confirm a subjugation”.³⁸ Following this interpretation, Koran donations to Tajik migrants are embedded in the socio-political context of Gulf charity. Thus, they instil and reinforce “the common sense of hegemonic relationships” that cements demonstrative aristocratic hierarchy and neo-traditional authoritarian structures.³⁹ This logic of gift-giving makes Emirati nationals and other Arabs working in Dubai’s endowments active agents in maintaining their status as “a dominant wealthy population group amid the influx of rapid immigration and multiculturalism”.⁴⁰

In this sense, and as a second argument, Koran donations involve Tajik migrants in the circulation and exchange of prestigious consumer goods. By embedding them in mechanisms of place-branding, Saudi-donated Korans are provided with an exclusive commodity value that goes far beyond their religious authority as a sacred text. Labelled as just another consumer good brought from Dubai as *dubaiskyj* (in Russian ‘made in’ or ‘from Dubai’), the Korans mediate the process of transforming Gulf cities like Dubai into brands and thus “into an easily readable object of consumption”.⁴¹ In their quality as a medium, circulating Saudi-donated Korans reconfigure migrants’ religious experience, as they index the cultural and political hegemony of the Arabian Gulf, and thus a socio-economic project of urban development with a political, programmatic, and brandish agenda that feeds Arab nationalism in the region. The Arabian Gulf as an idea, a utopia, that “claims reversal of the cultural hegemonic order in the region”,⁴² is spectacularly represented in the hyperreality and hyper-exclusivity of Dubai’s urban landscape. These representations are not uncontested as they simultaneously epitomise success and progress and dominance and arrogance.⁴³ However, Tajik migrants consume this ambivalent idea of the Arabian Gulf when visiting iconic buildings, tourism sites and shopping malls, but also when going to charitable endowments and praying in Dubai’s spectacular mosques. Using, gifting, or circulating Saudi-donated Korans, Tajiks engage in a sense of ‘Arabness’, through which they attach themselves to the Arabian Gulf as an exclusive modernisation project in the region, from which they are explicitly excluded because of their temporary migrant status.

³⁸ Parkhurst 2014, 345; 346.

³⁹ Ibid., 345.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 350.

⁴¹ Bromber et al. 2014, 10.

⁴² Ibid., 1.

⁴³ Ibid., 11.

Conclusion: A material geography of ‘bourgeois Islam’

Tracing the mobility of prestigious religious objects through multiple socio-spatial contexts and the process of their consequent transfiguration into an indexing consumer good, this chapter explored ‘Dubai business’ as a fluid and dynamic spatiality that transcends taken-for-granted spatial orders and conventional unitary area frames such as ‘Central Asia’, ‘the Middle East’, or ‘the Gulf’. An assemblage of migration, trading and tourism business, and Islamic life projects, ‘Dubai business’ evolves as a dynamic transregional platform of material and immaterial exchange and circulation that connects, creates, and forms multiple entangled Muslim worlds (economic, social, and religious, Persophone, Arabophone, Russophone, post-Soviet, among others). These Muslim worlds are appropriated, inhabited, shaped, and experienced by Tajik migrants in multiple ways.

In line with Enseng Ho’s⁴⁴ methodological advocacy for “thick transregionalism”, this chapter suggested a phenomenological approach to understand the existential dimension of transregional spatial entities. Focusing on connectivity, material mediation, and transition, the chapter has shown how ‘Dubai business’ shapes migrants’ lifeworlds in multiple ways. As illustrated, Tajiks are involved in Dubai’s tourism and trading business world via Persian-speaking networks. While ‘Persianness’ provides an important cultural repertoire for economic development and spiritual advancement, Tajik migrants’ display of ‘Arabness’ articulates their strong longing for attachment to the more prestigious, but exclusive, Arab world of business, commerce, and cultural hegemony. Obviously, the Muslim worlds that Tajik migrants inhabit in Dubai are simultaneously real, experienced, and sensed, and thus materially existing *and* imagined. At the same time, these worlds are contested. When claiming to belong flexibly to both the *Persian Gulf*, with its historically grown cosmopolitan trading culture, and the *Arabian Gulf*, a political project that promotes an Arab nationalism that seeks to overwrite the cosmopolitan and transcultural heritage of long-established economic and cultural connectivities across the Indian Ocean,⁴⁵ Tajiks situate themselves in the actual political and cultural discourses on regional supremacy.

⁴⁴ Ho 2014, 885.

⁴⁵ Among other studies see Vora 2013, 36ff.

Through their involvement in transregional networks of Muslim mobility, trade, and connectivity, Tajik migrants creatively participate in processes of economic and cultural globalisation, as they are re-worked in intermediate regions such as the Gulf. Although Saudi-donated Korans are not the only Korans used by Tajik migrants and their families, their multi-local presence points to Saudi Arabia's external reach and the country's influence to shape globalised cultural and political fields through international religious donations. Globalisation has revitalised the idea of the Ummah, as a postcolonial form of imagination for Muslims, particularly in migrant and diasporic contexts. Migrant narratives of the Ummah as a business community that creates moments of sharing, solidarity, as well as a sense of belonging to something larger that promotes post-national orientations, confirms Appadurai's diagnosis that "imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only escape".⁴⁶ At the same time, different conceptions of what the Ummah is, are worked out in complex interactions of every day Muslim sociabilities, that emphasise diversity, difference, fragmentation, and reproduce existing notions of 'centre' and 'periphery'.

Tajiks' positioning within the Ummah is framed through their sensed 'peripheral' status among Muslims in Central Asia and the wider world. Fashioning an exclusive migrant identity as Muslim businesspeople articulates their desire to overcome ethnic, regional, and national concepts of identity, inherent to the notion of 'Tajikness'. This observation is in line with the refusal to share business and living spaces with Turkish-speaking groups from Central Asia. Additionally, a sense of an elitist 'Muslimness' indexes Tajiks' socio-economic position in the highly pluralised and hierarchical migrant world in the Emirates, where they operate as 'free' businesspeople independently from the Emirati *kafāla* sponsorship system. Tajiks, in that way, reproduce racial discourses about low-wage labour Asian migrants, mainly from South Asia. The latter group of migrants, as shown, was not perceived as part of Dubai's Muslim business worlds by Tajiks. As a form of cultural and political situatedness, Kresse⁴⁷ has argued that peripherality can favour a cosmopolitanism that grounds on flexibility, openness, adaptability, and creativity to engage in multiple discourses, debates, and cultures on different scales. This offers a repertoire of knowledge, experience, and skills, Tajiks can draw upon while abroad to fashion their intermediary status as economic middlemen and cultural brokers. This goes hand in hand with the experience of both superiority and subordination.

⁴⁶ Appadurai 1996, 7.

⁴⁷ Kresse 2013, 80–82.

This social reality complicates the common understanding of centre and periphery and creates ambivalent narratives of belonging and the imaginary notion of the Ummah as a normative entity.

With their aesthetic authority and mobile biography, Saudi-donated Korans operate both as a medium and as 'icons', through which processes of socio-economic, religious and cultural positioning and re-positioning of Tajik migrants can be traced as well as embedded in translocal and transregional fields of mobility, connectivity, and exchange. So, how do ideas (religious experiences, ideals, and ideas of place) travel between the Gulf and the home of Tajik migrants? The blueprint of Gulf urbanism is being increasingly adopted in other parts of the Muslim world, in the course of transforming post-colonial urban landscapes into globalising places of living, working, and leisure that serve the new needs of the middle class and the demands of both local and international visitors.⁴⁸ In Tajikistan, the aspirational world of 'Dubai business' finds its way into private households mainly through prestigious goods that travel in the pockets of migrants. Thus, Saudi-donated Korans play a role in terms of their indexicality for an exclusive 'bourgeois Islam'. An aspirational migrant project oriented towards middle class lifestyles and social mobility, the notion of 'bourgeois Islam' is inseparable from 'Dubai' as a brand that epitomises progress and success in the context of a hypermodernity that is highly exclusive.⁴⁹ When Tajiks use Saudi-donated Korans from Dubai for their daily prayers or individual Koran recitations, during ritual gatherings or as a travel souvenir visibly displayed in the wall unit, they consume the exclusivity attached to the notion of 'bourgeois Islam', and thus participate in this project while they themselves stay at home. Moreover, Saudi-donated Korans are passed around in private gatherings where the wives of returned migrants flaunt Dubai's lifestyle among relatives and neighbours as they show off the latest Islamic fashion, modern kitchen appliances and trendy tableware that their husbands brought from Dubai. Thus, Saudi-donated Korans become a marker of social distinction and, in this capacity, a commodity whose symbolic value is created by desire, as the Korans also index the taste, cosmopolitanism, and exclusive urbanity of their owners.

⁴⁸ See the works of Adham 2014, Choplin and Franck 2014.

⁴⁹ Bromber et al. 2014, 3.

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Peter Wien

Exile as Liminality

Tracing Muslim Migrants in Fascist Europe

Abstract: The chapter is a case study of the success and failures of Muslim migrants to claim space for themselves in the Western world before and during the Second World War. Members of the Druze-Lebanese Hamada family tried to stabilise their lives under the precarious conditions of exile in light of their host societies' projections of Muslim foreignness and Arab exoticism, which they tried to exploit for their own benefit taking on roles and enacting personae to satisfy expectations between France, the United States, Switzerland, and Italy. Mussolini's pretentious showcasing as a "protector of Islam" opened up distinct possibilities for the Hamadas in an environment where tricksters and opportunists met attention seekers and careerists in the fascist system. In particular, this chapter shows how Nur Hamada went to great lengths to prove her authenticity as a representative of modern Muslim womanhood.

Coping with liminality

Around June 20, 1940, a man stepped into the offices of the Italian Embassy in Madrid to "pay a visit of courtesy." He said that his name was Amin Hamada. His nephew worked for the Italian-Arabic language propaganda radio station Radio Bari, and his grandnephew attended the renowned Convitto Nazionale boarding school in the city of Teramo, a two-hour drive from Rome. He also claimed to have good rapport with the Italian government. When asked about the reasons for his stay in Madrid, he said that he had been invited by Franco's Foreign Minister Juan Luis Beigbeder, whose competence in Arab questions and sympathy for the Arabs he praised. He was also going to visit Morocco, where he had already made contact with leaders in the Spanish and French zones. The Spanish, he said, were trying to foment trouble in the latter, to have a pretext for intervention. When reporting this encounter to Rome, the embassy called Hamada a "fuoruscito," a refugee or exile, and a "Syrian agitator."¹

1 Archives of the Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rome [henceforth MAE Rome], AffPol, Siria, Busta 24: Ambasciata d'Italia, Telespresso N. 3925/1166, Indirizzato a R. Ministero degli Affari Esteri = Roma – A.E.M. Uff.- IIIo, e, per conoscenza: R. Consolato d'Italia = Tetuan, Oggetto:

Agitator, refugee, migrant, wanderer – Amin was a bit of all. Madrid was just one station of an odyssey he and his older sister Nur had been on for several years, starting from their home country Lebanon with stations in France, the United States, Switzerland, and Fascist Italy. This chapter traces their migrant and exile experiences with a particular focus on their Italian episode. Exile, migrant, refugee – the Arabic equivalents for these words stand for semantic nuances. Based on their verbal roots, the word *manfa* emphasises flight and the place one is evicted to, *mahjar* is a sanctuary, it denotes the place for which one leaves another place, and *ghurba* or *ightirab* stress the estrangement from one's own country, the experience of being a foreigner. The semantic differences contain different degrees of agency that also reflect different degrees of deliberateness in the denotation of absence. Migration can be forced, can bring relief, can be done with a purpose, but it always constitutes estrangement from both the place of origin and the destination. The terms are open ended, they depict more than journeys or travellers' sojourns. Also, migration into exile is not necessarily bipolar. Some exiles moved liberally, though not necessarily deliberately, across a multitude of borders, not just between two countries. This chapter investigates the refugee-migrants' agency. Nur Hamada, Amin's sister, plays a central role in this investigation due to her renown as a transnational activist on behalf of Muslim feminism. Her story highlights how a migrant could exploit a specific social and discursive location for personal interests. Being a Muslim woman in a western, non-Muslim context turned her into a mirror of stereotypes and expectations, which she in turn could bend and shape in an act of deliberate mimesis.

According to the social theorist Arpad Szakolczai, "mimesis," or "imitation," describes a kind of action that is available for a person in a "liminal" state.² "Liminality," to start with, is a concept used for the analysis of rites of passage in ethnographic research. The liminal phase denotes the period, or passage "betwixt and between," to use Victor Turner's classic phrase, between segregation and re-aggregation, when a person ritually leaves a stable status in society and, respectively, re-enters society moving into a new stable status. Rites of this sort are universal, as they accompany the entry of youth into adulthood, or marriage. Arguably, the person who is in a state of liminality is deprived of structure that would ordinarily offer orientation for decision making, which is why the individual resorts to mimesis as a course of action. In other

Amin Hamada, [dated:] Madrid, addi 22 giugno 1940 Anno XVIII, [signed: illegible]. The document falsely introduced the grandnephew in Teramo as Amin Hamada's son.

2 Szakolczai 2009, 154.

words, a person's agency in a transitory state is limited to the imitation of other people's actions or to responding to their expectations as he or she is still unfamiliar with the rules of the new game they are supposed to enter. Another possible synonym for mimesis is "simulation," which arguably leaves more room for individual decision-making when the person grows familiar with the rules of the game, yet is still in a volatile position on the playing field. Liminal situations can evoke a specific need for creative action, too, offering new answers to problems with a lasting, structural impact on a person, group, or entire society. Sociologists started to adopt the concept of liminality in the 1970s applying it to wider social contexts where not only individuals but entire social groups or societies, if not civilisations, enter liminal states. In the realm of literary criticism, Homi K. Bhabha has argued that the term applies to the positionality of migrants "gathering on the edge of 'foreign' cultures," and to the processes of nation formation in an imperialist context where metropolitan nationalism produces a permanent tension between the master text of the national narrative and the variety of the experiences of those who live within the national community, including migrants. According to Bhabha, the migrants mimic gestures in a "mere imitation of life and labour" but without a chance to escape "the life of the double," or stand-in. Migrants thus occupy a liminal space between absorption and rejection by the host society. Their position is not static, but they remain in a constant state of transitioning.³

For this chapter's period of inquiry, Paris has received particular scholarly attention as a node for international migration, and as an incubator of globalism and radical anti-colonialist activism among migrants, who formed a discourse community despite their diverse origins. Michael Goebel's work draws attention to the wanderers between the colonial realm and the metropolis and the crucial role they played in the formulation of anti-imperialist nationalist ideology.⁴ Other places like London, Geneva, and New York City come to mind as hubs for migrant and exile activism. However, it remains an open question how deep the ideological convictions gained in exile went. When the precarious existence and specific unreal in-between-ness of life in the exile community gave way to the concrete issues that were at stake after the migrants' return home, the convictions gained abroad had to be re-inserted into the thicket of a

³ Szakolczai 2009, 154, Turner 1967, 93–111; Thomassen 2009, esp. 14–20, Horváth, Thomassen, and Wydra 2015, 1–8, Bhabha 1990, 291–322, esp. 303, quotes on 291, 316. An example for the application of the liminality paradigm on contemporary migration can be found in Kirk, Bal, and Janssen 2017, 2771–87.

⁴ Goebel 2015, *passim*; for "wanderlust" see 15.

local context, after leaving un-structured liminality. This is a particularly pertinent question when the focus shifts to fascist metropolises like Berlin or Rome as migrant spaces. They raise questions about ideological “contamination” or the “culpability of exile,” and the extent to which Arab and Muslim exiles and migrants in Nazi Germany, voluntary or involuntary, became implicated in the deeds and ideology of the host country when the liminality of the migrant existence created conditions where the migrant was forced to cosy up, adapt, and subject him or herself to the standards of the host community. The arguments of this chapter build on more than two decades of research at the ZMO about such Muslim encounters with Nazi and fascist ideology, politics, and society. The knowledge gained in this effort carries the question about migrant experiences into a dark place where ideological and practical contingencies interact. How do migrants behave in highly ideologised societies, how are they received in places such as Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, Spain under Franco, or France under Pétain, and what do these encounters have to contribute to an inquiry about the rise of postcolonial nationalism?⁵

For the creative potentials of liminality to have a lasting impact, the liminal state cannot last indefinitely. A reconstruction of society needs to follow its deconstruction that initially opened the liminal phase, such as during a revolutionary period, or for the duration of a devastating war. If the in-between-ness of the liminal status persists, people resort to narrow-minded imitation as they are trying to cope with instability and disorientation. According to Szokolczai, this is when they turn to tricksters and demagogues for leadership and emulation, who are experienced with life on the margins. In a status of permanent revolution, the trickster politicises and institutionalises his position and becomes a dictator skilfully perpetuating the liminal situation.⁶ This chapter makes use of the trickster as a trope, but in a slightly different way, arguing that migrants could use liminality to enter into a role-play themselves responding, as alluded before, to stereotypes of their host societies and playing to the expectations of their audiences. They did this to achieve a semblance of stability in their lives. As tricksters and jesters, or, to reiterate Bhabha’s words, as “doubles,” they tried to claim back some of their agency. The traces they left in the archives offer

⁵ I have conceptualised the dilemma in Wien 2011, 332–58. The article investigates the involvement of Arab exiles and students in the German propaganda apparatus before and during the Second World War. It presents this involvement in the light of the pressures they were exposed to in a racialised society where those had to make a living for whom returning home was not an option because they were political exiles, had family in Germany, or opted to finish university degrees.

⁶ Thomassen 2009, 21–24, Szokolczai 2009, 154–59.

images of resilience, despair, shrewdness, convergence, and ingratiation. The Hamada family offers a particularly dazzling example for such shrewd survivalism paired with the brazenness of impostors. They got involved with members of the political establishment in their host countries who considered them as potentially useful or exotic enough to attract attention. Thus, they moved astonishingly close to the centres of power, while they remained economically marginalised at the same time, and with little recourse. Nur Hamada developed an intricate persona as a representative of Muslim womanhood in a cross-over between an oriental princess and a proponent of a limited version of women's rights. In this she, together with her brother, tried to act as the kind of “ethno-political entrepreneur” that Goebel identified in the Parisian interwar context, shaping and labelling migrant communities inwards and outwards.⁷ Arguably, Nur Hamada's story therefore offers a glimpse at the image-making dynamics of the Western encounter with Muslim migrants in general.

The following presentation of the travels and travails of the Hamada family is based on a reading of archival records in Italy and information available in a handful of secondary sources. The chapter, however, offers only a partial answer to the broad question of the long-lasting impact of migrant experiences, beyond the migrants' re-insertion into their home societies. A comprehensive rendering of the Hamada story, including the time after their return to Lebanon, will have to rely on further materials in Syrian, Lebanese, French, and US archives.

A transnational feminist and undocumented migrant

When Amin Hamada presented himself to the Italian embassy in Madrid, he did not disclose that he was only tagging along with his sister, Nur Hamada, who was without a doubt the more interesting of the Hamada exiles. She had a name in Arab Muslim reformist circles as a champion of women's rights and Arab nationalist affairs. Nur was born between 1887 and 1898, the daughter of Shaykh Muhammad Ibn Qasim ibn Husayn, who according to “family materials” was “the first Sheikh of a united Druze community.” She attended university in Beirut and spoke several languages. Her older brother Shaykh Husayn Hamada succeeded his father in his position, and she had a close relationship

7 Goebel 2015, 58; his usage of the concept is based on Brubaker 2002, 166–68.

with her younger brother “with whom she shared an interest in the promotion of Arabic language and literature.” She was married without children to a distant Hamada family member, who served as a military officer in the Syrian Mandate army. By 1932, she was a widow and received a military pension. Her husband had apparently supported her unveiling.⁸

There is little further information about Nur Hamada’s life in the existing historiography. It presents her as a pioneer of women’s organization in Syria and the broader Arab world. According to Elizabeth Thompson, Nur was already a leading young voice of Syrian and Lebanese feminism when she gave a speech at the first conference of the Lebanese Women’s Union in 1928. She played a crucial role in the organisation of the two Eastern Women’s Congresses of 1930 in Damascus and 1932 in Damascus, Baghdad and Tehran. However, other than the first generation of Syrian feminists of the early 1920s, who had advocated for women’s suffrage, her form of feminist activism stood for a shift away from a primacy of political equality to one of social equality in marriage and inheritance rights as well as equal pay with an emphasis on the values of “patriotic motherhood.”⁹

Nur Hamada elaborated on her role in the organisation of the first women’s congresses in the Middle East in a speech that she gave to the Tehran session of the Second Eastern Women’s Congress in 1932. As a founder and board member of various women’s charities in Lebanon she had been instrumental in forming Muslim and inter-religious Arab women’s associations active in Lebanon and Syria. With the support of the famed Egyptian women’s activist Huda Sha’rawi she had organised the two Eastern Women’s Congresses, personally convincing the French High Commissioner to give his consent, and with the endorsement of the London based International Alliance of Women, of which she was a member, and of the League of Nations.¹⁰ Most of this information about Nur Hamada’s life up until 1933 is also confirmed in Nova Robinson’s recent doctoral dissertation on the transnational activism of Syrian and Lebanese feminists in the first half of the 20th century.¹¹

Nur Hamada’s ambitions went beyond mere local community activism. Probably, regional contacts with fellow Muslim women’s activists and with members of European sister organisations awakened her desire to develop her potentials

⁸ DuBois and Emrani 2008, 107.

⁹ Thompson 2000, 141–51.

¹⁰ The speech is published verbatim in DuBois and Emrani 2008, 113–21.

¹¹ Robinson 2015. A relevant part is available in print in Robinson 2020, 121–37, and Robinson 2021, 168–84.

as a figurehead, outside the boundaries of the patriarchal society of notables she lived in.¹² In 1933, she embarked on a grand tour of the Western hemisphere to propagate herself as a proponent of ‘Oriental feminism.’ In October, she gave an interview to Maria Vérone, President of the French League for the Rights of Women (Ligue Française pour le Droit des Femmes) while passing through Paris. Vérone bemoaned the scarcity of knowledge about the women’s liberation movement in the Orient. In a patronising manner typical for the relationship between a Western and an ‘Oriental’ activist, Vérone remained fixated on questions of the veil. Nur showed her photos from the women’s congresses she had organised, but her French counterpart only noticed the different degrees of unveiling on the group pictures, from face veils in 1928, to headscarves in 1930, to a group of women in 1932 who were “completely liberated from the veil, symbol of ancient serfdom (symbole de l’antique servage). (...) An immense progress has been achieved.” When asked about the outcomes of the conferences, Nur outlined a vision of patriotic motherhood, which apparently did not satisfy Vérone, who noted dismissively that her demands were appropriate for “Islam or the countries with a purely oriental civilization.” Nur found out that it was difficult for a Muslim feminist to prevail even in the eyes of a Western combatant.¹³

The interview, which took place shortly before Nur Hamada’s departure for North America, gave her a taste of the objectification that she and her brother would be exposed to, and that was partially of their own making. It foreshadowed the formation of an Oriental Muslim persona. In November 1933, the *New York Times* noted the arrival of the 36-year-old “Mme Nour Hamade” as a notable passenger disembarking the Ocean steamer *Berengaria*. She was “recognised as the foremost feminine leader in Syria,” who had been a delegate to the “International Women’s Alliance at Geneva” and was now traveling “to attend the meetings of the International Committee for Peace,” to be followed by a half year stay and lecture tour. Upon arrival, she told the *New York Times* about women’s progress under the French mandate which could not have happened under “Turkish rule.”¹⁴

Hamada arrived in New York with high hopes and great credentials, but she miscalculated and consequently entered the liminal zone of an exile existence.

¹² For the deconstruction and reconstruction of the paternal order in Syria and Lebanon during World War II and the French Mandate period, see Thompson 2000, 15–90.

¹³ *L’Oeuvre*, October 28, 1933, 5: “L’Oeuvre des femmes: Le Féminisme en Orient.” Compare Robinson 2021, 174–275, Weber 2001, 125–57.

¹⁴ *New York Times*, November 8, 1933, 32: “Mme. Nour Hamade here. Sister of Grand Sheik of Druses to attend Peace Meeting.” This reference is also in DuBois and Emrani 2008, 107, see fn 1.

This is probably where she joined her brother Amin, even though his activities in the United States are difficult to determine. The only trace that is available so far is his involvement with a certain Colonel Don Rockwell, who had some local fame in New York City as an Orientalising romantic poet and convert to Islam.¹⁵ Short reports and classifieds in the *New York Times* listed some publications and speaking engagements that Rockwell had at gatherings of local women's societies, suggesting that he was active in a milieu that provided a fitting context for interactions with the Hamada siblings.¹⁶ The immediate link between Rockwell and Amin Hamada is a book of poetry, the *Bazaar of Dreams*, that Rockwell published in 1934, full with Orientalising clichés, but also with references to current topics such as Arab nationalism and Islamic unity, as well as with dedications of poems to leading contemporary men of politics and culture in the Arab world. One poem, "The Rise of Islam's Star," is dedicated to the "Grand Sheikh Amin Hamada Bey," who also provided Arabic translations of a selection of the poems, which are printed at the end of the book. There is also a biographical sketch in Arabic of "al-sha'ir al-amirki al-Kulunil Muhammad Faisal Dun Rukwal" that has been the only identifiable source of information with some data about Rockwell's life. Born in the US in 1895 he stemmed from a family that, Hamada assured, went back to William the Conqueror. After college, he worked as a publicist and undertook extended international travels, but it was a trip to the Muslim East and the Arab lands in 1925 that influenced him to convert to Islam. Aside from that, Hamada did not even offer an explanation on what basis Rockwell used the title Colonel. The claim of a royal lineage can be read, however, as an indicator for the role that imaginary ancestries may have played in the Hamadas' US circles.¹⁷ For Rockwell, as for many a European or North American bourgeois, conversion was just one step in the fulfilment of an exoticising Orientalist dream, which was in itself a liminal manoeuvre. The Hamada siblings seemed to be the perfect foil for such desires.¹⁸

¹⁵ The internet still references him as an exemplary convert. See for example <https://www.islamreligion.com/articles/107/colonel-donald-s-rockwell-poet-and-critic-usa>, accessed February 14, 2020.

¹⁶ *New York Times*, November 24, 1935, BR14: "Books and Authors;" February 4, 1937, 19: "Events Today;" April 11, 1937, A16: "Books and Authors;" March 31, 1940, 54: "Activities Among Women's Clubs Scheduled for This Week in the Metropolitan Area;" April 28, 1940, 46: "Week's Activities Scheduled by Women's Clubs in the Metropolitan Area."

¹⁷ Rockwell and Hamada 1934, 117; 167.

¹⁸ Compare the remarks about the literary figure of the "Gentleman" in Bhabha 1990, 296. For a particularly intriguing example for conversion and liminality see the recent Baer 2020, passim.

Signposts of Nur Hamada's remarkable American travel history appear in the files of the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (USINS) as documented by Ellen Carol DuBois and Haleh Emrani, as well as in articles of the journal *Equal Rights*, which they cite. Hamada had received a US visa in 1933. Her brother had been in the country since 1929, and Nur had contacts in the American women's movement. In November 1933, she participated in the Ninth Annual Conference of the Committee on the Cause and Cure of War in DC and became an affiliate of the National Women's Party to learn about organizing. She decided to stay in the US and live with relatives in Detroit for a couple of years to learn English and teach Arabic, and to be with her brother who wrote for the Arabic newspaper *al-Bayan* in New York City. Apparently, she never took care to secure a residency permit and therefore started to be actively prosecuted for deportation in 1935. She fought back for two years with the support of the National Women's Party and some of her Detroit Arabic students who sent petitions to the USINS. When she was eventually detained for deportation in February 1936, a US citizen of Syrian background visited her and claimed to be her fiancé, but the immigration officials believed that it was a hoax. The Syrian community of Detroit came to her rescue once more and bailed her out, but after overstaying the grace period that had been granted to her, she lost that support as well and was even accused of fraud. Nur and her brother escaped in June 1937, embarking on a ship bound for France as proper refugees with merely 20 Dollars in their pockets. According to the USINS files, the ship's captain let her on board when she assured that family members would cover the rest of their third-class passage upon arrival, but when the ship arrived in France, neither the Hamadas nor their family could be found.¹⁹

Nur Hamada surfaced again in Geneva in 1938. Robinson's dissertation offers a detailed and somewhat distressing account of her sojourn in the Swiss metropole. It coincided with the creation of the Committee of Experts on the Legal Status of Women at the League of Nations as a nod to women's rights issues in response to lobbying by international women's groups. Robinson documents how the League of Nations archives recorded Nur Hamada's efforts to use the committee's foundation as an opportunity to reinsert herself into international women's activism. In more negative terms, she exploited the situation in an attempt to secure an elevated position and a sizable income to finance her life style. This drive may be understandable in the light of the humiliations she

¹⁹ DuBois and Emrani 2008, 108–10.

had suffered in America, but the means she used make her look not only like a trickster, but like a charlatan.²⁰

Hamada's outward concern was respectable. Eight members constituted the committee, half of whom were men, and all of whom veered from either Europe or North America. Their selection was based on nominations by League of Nations member states, which excluded states under colonial or Mandate rule per definition. International women's organisations, primarily from Latin America, lobbied the League to accept additional, non-European women experts. In January 1938, the Secretariat of the League of Nations received letters from several women's organisations that claimed to be active in Beirut and Damascus, but also from a so-called Orient-Occident League in New York City, nominating Nur Hamada as a representative for Eastern women. Later in the month Nur appeared at the League of Nations offices in person. Over the course of the year until January 1939, she led a campaign to secure a seat at the table for herself. She used a Geneva hotel as headquarters, claiming that a Lebanese-Syrian women's organisation had named her President for Life, and that she was speaking for the Geneva mission of the Orient-Occident League. She did not know that the Secretariat had requested information about her in the meantime, with disastrous results. An anonymous report, prepared by a Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) associate in Beirut, conveyed that her law degree was fake, and that people in Beirut had not heard of the organisations that had recommended her. One letter had been sent from a relative's address in Beirut, a signature on another letter had been provided by a woman of allegedly questionable reputation. The condescending and orientalist tone of the report notwithstanding, it argued rather convincingly that Nur Hamada was a trickster. According to the damning remarks of a Druze shaykh residing in Beirut, she habitually sought pretexts to get her travels financed. No one had heard of her since she had left Beirut for America five years earlier.

Nur Hamada seemed desperate, but she had staying power. She sent out invitations to a conference on women's rights that she said she was organising, and got a newspaper to report on an event, where, however, all attendants but herself and an acquaintance were corresponding participants only. It is hard to avoid the impression that Nur Hamada was very eager to perform an act of simulation to become a female counterpart to Shakib Arslan, the well-respected representative for Arab-Muslim affairs at the League of Nations, who was also a fellow Druze from Mount Lebanon. Arslan was the scion of an aristocratic Druze

20 The assessment of Nur Hamada's motives for her actions in Geneva are the author's. They are not a direct reference to Robinson's analysis.

family and had a career as an Ottoman administrator, Muslim intellectual and poet, and as a delegate in the Ottoman Parliament before World War I. He became an exile after the war due to his continuing support for Ottoman sovereignty, taking up a liminal existence until shortly before the end of his life when he returned to Lebanon. He resided in Geneva from 1921 to 1946, detached from the intricacies of local politics in the Arab lands, but at the same time, in contrast to the Hamadas, he remained deeply connected through a closely-knit international network of contacts and supporters. He therefore retained considerable influence, though largely on a discursive level. It is more than likely that Nur Hamada met Arslan in Geneva, but he did not mention her in the contemporaneous issues of his largely self-authored journal *La Nation Arabe*.²¹

In Mussolini's Rome

When Nur Hamada travelled to Italy in late 1939, her reputation had been shattered twice, once in America, and once during her failed bid for leadership in Muslim women's international affairs. She was clearly hungry for recognition, worried about her increasing marginalisation, and probably also financially strained. While direct references to Islam had not been prominent in her statements in Geneva, the way she was inserted, or inserted herself into Rome's Middle Eastern exile community after the Geneva episode clearly marked her as a signifier in the Oriental Arab-Muslim imaginary of her fascist hosts. The following report about her and her brother Amin's engagement with Fascist Italy should not be read as a judgment over her morality and the sincerity of her feminist commitment, however. Rather, it illustrates in a remarkable way how the Hamadas' liminality as exiles created the conditions for their brief career as Fascist collaborators. This particular kind of migrant mimesis thus framed their culpability.

The Hamada siblings' journey to Italy had a pragmatic reason, too. Their nephew Mahmud Hamada had been living there since August 1939 when he and his wife undertook a trip to visit their children who were attending school in Italy. His Italophile and, supposedly, pro-fascist leanings were notorious in Beirut, so that he was barred from returning to Lebanon after the outbreak of

²¹ Robinson 2015, 248–321. See also Robinson 2020 and 2021, esp. 178–80, which, however, do not reference the critical Beirut report. On Arslan, see Cleveland 1985. For *La Nation Arabe* see Adal 2002.

World War II in September. His fascist connections probably helped him find employment with the Ministero della Cultura popolare (MinCulPop) and Radio Bari as a translator and propagandist.²² He may well have been the one to invite his aunt and uncle to his personal fascist paradise.

Whatever Amin's and Nur's actual commitment was, they lost no time and inserted themselves into the Arab exile community in Rome and its bonds with the fascist state. Nur Hamada gave a radio speech on the occasion of the end of Ramadan in November 1939. She addressed the "[s]ons of my country and my nation..." on the occasion of the feast "in our beloved language, the language of the letter *dâd*, the language of the great prophet and of the gracious Qur'an, from the Bari station, from Rome, the great city of the arts." Aside from greetings and well-wishes the speech was free from ideological allusions. However, it was exceptional that an Arab woman spoke on a station where women were otherwise largely absent, not as objects of deliberations, but as subjects with agency. To give her time on the air was probably a decision of opportunity, in line with the improvisational character of Radio Bari's programming altogether. Usually, the speakers were male Arab students who, like Nur Hamada, happened to be around, without experience or specific capacities.²³ The monthly Arabic magazine *Radio Bari* ("Radyu Bari"), published by MinCulPop, introduced Hamada as an "Arab women's leader" ("al-za'ima al-niswiyya al-'arabiyya"), President of the "International Women's Society Orient Occident" ("ra'isat al-jam'iyya al-nisa'iyya al-duwaliyya al-Sharq wa-l-Gharb"), in the name of which she also extended her greetings in the speech. Apparently, she did not shy away from promoting the same persona that had crumbled so quickly in Geneva.²⁴

22 MAE Rome, AffPol, Siria, Busta 25, Folder: 1941, AEM 3°, Amin Bey Hamada e sorella – Sitt Nur Bey – Stessa posizione 1940, Siria 1/1: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Gabinetto, 1/04806, Appunto per la Direzione Generale A.E.M.-III, [dated:] Roma, 25 November 1941 XX, [signed:] Il Capo di Gabinetto [illegible]. Transmits the following, enclosed letter by Mahmud Hamada, living in Rome at Piazza Adriana 12, with a request to examine and give notice. [attached:] (handwritten letter, three pages) [dated:] Roma 27 Ottobre 1941 XIX, [signed:] Lo Sceicco Mahmud Hamada (Piazza Adriana 12), All'Eccellenza il Comm. De Cesare, Segretario Particolare del Duce, Roma. See also Marzano 2015, 91; 135.

23 Marzano 2015, 90; 199–201.

24 *Radyu Bari*, January 1940, 18–19: [Section] "Mir'at al-Sayyidat [Mirror of Ladies]: Al-Amira Nur Hamada, ra'isat al-jam'iyya al-nisa'iyya al-duwaliyya al-Sharq wa-l-Gharb."



Fig. 1: Nur Hamada speaking on Radio Bari. The picture appeared in the magazine *Radyu Bari*, January 1940, 18.

Nur received a more prominent platform on January 20, 1940, when the *Partito nazionale fascista* invited her to give a speech on the occasion of the celebrations of 'Id al-Adha, organised by the *Gruppi universitari fascisti* as an event for foreign students. As this was apparently the first occasion of its kind in Italy, diplomatic representatives of “Muslim Oriental states” such as the Iraqi ambassador, as well as Italian students of Oriental studies and Roman orientalists gathered in the Palazzo Braschi, a significant fascist landmark in Rome.²⁵ Nur, who introduced herself once more as president of the Orient-Occident League (“Lega Oriente-Occidente”), clearly intended to massage the vanities of her audience. First, she laid out her commitment to interreligious and international partnership that had been so important for her projections in Geneva. Rome was the seat of the vicar of Christ, “salute su di Lui,” she said, using what was probably in Arabic the Muslim honorific “peace be upon him.” The beautiful feast of sacrifice was a tangible proof for a union between the Crescent and the Cross, a prelude to peace, unity, and brotherhood among all descendants of humankind, she said. “From this foundation, a gigantic and flourishing civilization will arise

²⁵ Today, it houses the Museum of Rome: http://www.museodiroma.it/en/sede/palazzo_braschi, accessed February 12, 2020. At times, during Fascist rule, a large rendering of Mussolini's face famously adorned its façade: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Palazzo_braschi_1934.jpg, accessed February 12, 2020.

that will collect from the beauties of the Orient and the Occident the fruits of a mature civilization, infusing in the hearts of the children of these two worlds truth, justice, and virtue.”

She explained that during the feast, millions of Muslims commemorated the day when God told Abraham not to sacrifice his son Isaac: “Oh, how beautiful is this anniversary, which today arrives twice as solemnly, that is twice as much because of the honor that you bestow through your participation,” she told her audience. Her speech, which had been quite innocuous so far, now turned into flattery: “We pray to the Lord on high that he may make all your days as festive, and that you could always be happy under the shield of the great emperor Vittorio Emanuele III, and protected by His government, on top of which is the Duce, whose wisdom equals that of Solomon. Certainly, all of you will join me in exclaiming: ‘Long live the great king and the head of his government, the Duce, long live the noble Italian nation! Long live the Arab and Muslim monarchs, along with their monarchies and all Arab and oriental populations, and also, long live all nations whose motto is *Truth, justice, and peace!*’.”

She concluded, addressing the students in the audience to “[c]lose your ranks, raise your heads, and renew your glory, oh children of the Arabs!”²⁶

Nur’s speech was certainly not a political statement, nor was it meant as propaganda for the Arab students. Arguably, it was mostly self-serving in that it was a verbal prostration in front of the men who embodied Fascist Italy’s statehood. It was a praise of monarchism, because Italy was a monarchy, and it closed with a reference to nationalist youthfulness and discipline, which Nur Hamada may have picked up as core elements of Fascist self-fashioning. The reference to “Truth, Justice, and Peace,” on the other hand, sounds more like an atavism from her League of Nations episode. It did not fit in a time when Italy was quite unpopular in the Middle East for its cruel imperialist policy in Libya and the conquest of Ethiopia.²⁷ Just months earlier, Mussolini had ordered the occupation of Albania, and only a few months later he would try to reap the benefits of the Axis alliance with Germany invading southern France in June.

In a more subtle way, Nur’s appearance at the celebration illustrates how the liminality of her situation made her mimic the stereotypes of an orientalist

²⁶ MAE Rome, AffPol, Siria, Busta 24: Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Direzione generale per il servizio della stampa estera, *Telespresso* N. 532/43, Indirizzato a R. Ministero degli affari esteri, e per con.: Direzione Generale della Propaganda Sede, (Oggetto) Sitt Nur Bey Hamadah, Roma 26 Gen. 1940 Anno XVIII. (signed: [illegible]), (contains a cover letter and a translation of the speech); Marzano 2015, 200.

²⁷ Gershoni and Jankowski 2010, 16–17 et al., Erlich 2014, 271–88.

romance between East and West, Islam and Christianity, that had been haunting her and her brother since the days in America. It was the religious holiday that secured her a spot in the limelight. Moreover, the topos of motherly care for the sons of the country was typical for the Muslim feminist discourse in Arab lands at the time, but also sat well with her fascist hosts.²⁸ A report on the gathering in Radio Bari's magazine sheds light on the channels that Nur Hamada likely used to ingratiate herself with the authorities. Among the people in the audience were two leading women's rights proponents with close connections to the Fascist regime, Contessa Daisy di Robilant and Maria Castellani. The former was an advocate for mothers' and children's rights and held leading positions in national and international women's organisations, who, however, had grown more distant from Mussolini in the second half of the 1930s, yet remained a well-known public figure. Castellani, in turn, was a prominent US-educated mathematician, who headed an important Fascist women's professional organisation. As both women had no obvious connection to the Arab community in Rome, their presence must have been due to former links with Nur Hamada from international women's organisation circles, but they also confirm that Nur tried to establish herself as a tool of Fascist propaganda.²⁹

The Hamadas had an obsession with status. Nur's kowtowing to Italian and Arab royalty was an effort to pull herself out of the twilight of insignificance. In Italy, they presented themselves as members of the Druze upper nobility. Radio Bari called her "Princess Nur Hamada," a business card her nephew used introduced him as "Le Cheikh Mahmoud Hamada: fils du Grand Cheikh des Druzes."³⁰ Nur Hamada had referenced family connection to her brother, Mahmud's father, when she arrived in the United States already ("sister of the Grand Sheik of the Druses of Labanano and Mount Hermon in Syria").³¹ The same honorific titles appear in the Italian foreign policy documents, except for one, in which the Italian Consul in Damascus, Castellani, replied to Rome's

²⁸ On the topos, see for example Pollard 2005, 139–49; 152–63.

²⁹ *Radyu Bari*, March 1940, 64–65: "Ahamm Akhbar al-'Uruba: Al-Ihtifal bi-'Id al-Adha al-mubarak fi Ruma." On di Robilant and Castellani see De Grazia 1992, 91; 178; 184–85; 241–42; 258–59; 280. See also the biographical entry on the Robilant on <https://www.encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/di-robilant-daisy-countess-fl-1922-1933>, accessed February 12, 2020.

³⁰ Contained in MAE Rome, AffPol, Siria, Busta 25, Folder: 1941, AEM 3°, Amin Bey Hamada e sorella – Sitt Nur Bey – Stessa posizione 1940, Siria 1/1: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Gabinetto, 1/04806, Appunto per la Direzione Generale A.E.M.-III, [dated:] Roma, 25 November 1941 XX, [signed:] Il Capo di Gabinetto [illegible].

³¹ *New York Times*, "Mme. Nour Hamade here...", see fn. 4.

request for information about the dazzling couple. Castellani wrote that the Hamadas indeed belonged to the Druze of Lebanon. Amin, however, was hardly known in Damascus in spite of several sojourns. His name was known in the Druze mountains, but he could not be counted among the most influential leaders. Castellani also questioned Amin's assertion that he had fought in the 1925 Syrian Revolt as a combatant. It contradicted another of his claims, that he had left Syria because of allegations that involved him in an attempt on General Gouraud, the French High Commissioner's life. This attempt took place on June 24, 1921, long before the start of the revolt.³²

In the meantime, the Hamadas tried to build channels to the highest echelons of Italian politics and society. The French embassy seems to have been particularly suspicious of these activities. Correspondence with Paris mentions that the Hamadas had been received by the Pope – an information that could not be verified separately – and might be received by the Duce and the King. The diplomats also reported that Nur Hamada propagated the opening of an Islamic Centre in Rome, divided into sections for politics, culture, and religion, containing a mosque and a lecture hall, comparable to the mosque in Paris. She also suggested that MinCulPop should open an Arab information centre, similar to the ones in other European capitals, to promote Italian and Arab collaboration. With the help of Italian orientalists, it should make information for the press available to confirm that a new civilisation had emerged between Italy and the Arab world. Nur even requested a meeting with CulPop Minister Alessandro Pavolini, who passed the request on to another official to discuss the plans. It seems that, as in Geneva, she did not succeed in securing any appointments.³³ The same is true for her attempts to meet with royalty. In December 1939 and January 1940, the foreign ministry advised the royal family's ceremonial office against granting the Hamadas audiences with the King and Queen. The report mentioned that Nur Hamada posed as a champion of femi-

³² Castellani's report in MAE Rome, AffPol, Siria, Busta 24: R. Consolato d'Italia, Telespresso No. 113/28, Indirizzato a R. Ministero Degli Affari Esteri, A.E.M. = Uff. IIIo Roma, (Posizione) Ind., (Oggetto) Amin bey e sorella Sitt Nur Bey Hamadah, (Riferimento) Teles di V.E. 25 Dicembre u.sc. No. 13/244988/C., Damasco, addi 16 Gennaio 1940 Anno XVIIIo. (signed: Castellani); the claim about the Revolt is in an undated note in *ibid.*: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, A.E.M. IIIo, Appunto per la Direzione Gen. Affari Generali IVo, [no date, unsigned]. On the attempt on Gouraud's life see *Le Figaro*, June 25, 1921, p1: "Un attentat contre le général Gouraud," and Khoury 1987, 154.

³³ Marzano 2015, 200, see references on 246.

nism in the Orient and quoted the aforementioned less than complimentary information by the Damascus consulate.³⁴

The Hamadas' conspicuous consumption patterns did not help to mitigate unfavourable impressions either. When they arrived in Rome they chose representative accommodation in hotels near the Villa Borghese. Already in March 1940, Amin Hamada was in financial distress and notorious for frequenting luxury establishments. The "Direzione Generale di P.S." (Pubblica Sicurezza, the Directorate of Police in the Ministry of the Interior) had developed an interest in Amin, so that the foreign ministry felt compelled to inquire and confirm that there were reasons to support his residency and work permit in Italy, certainly in reference to work at MinCulPop. The ministry even asked how much it might cost to bail the Hamadas out financially.³⁵

Financial instability was a leitmotif of the relationship the Hamadas maintained with the Fascist state. In January 1940, Nur Hamada received an invitation from several Moroccan Muslim dignitaries, including the nationalist leader Makki al-Nasiri, to visit the Spanish zone in the country's north and consult them on the organisation of elementary school education for girls. The Spanish authorities had given their consent, and later it was confirmed that Amin would accompany his sister on the trip. How she secured this invitation remains unclear, but the Italians did not question her qualifications as an Islamic educationist. Apparently, everyone was happy to accept her role play for reality. Some did express concerns about her brother Amin, though, who had lived a precarious life in Paris and New York before coming to Italy, whose financial situation was desperate since he had squandered his fortune, yet who was still a spend-thrift, who did not know to use ordinary resources, and whose affairs were no reason for confidence, as the documents in the archives spell out.³⁶

34 MAE Rome, AffPol, Siria, Busta 24: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, A.E.M.III, 00698/L3, Appunto per il cerimoniale, [dated:] Roma, li 7 Gennaio 1940.XVIII, [signed:] Guarnaschelli.

35 MAE Rome, AffPol, Siria, Busta 24: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, A.G.IVo, 34/R 03816/279, Appunto per la Dir. Gen. A.E.M. Uff.IIIo, [dated:] Roma, li 12 Mar 1940 Anno XVIII, [signed:] illegible].

36 MAE Rome, AffPol, Siria, Busta 24: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Riservato, Telespresso N. 13/03981, Indirizzato a R. Consolato Tetuan, e per conoscenza R. Ambasciata Madrid, RR. Consolati Gen. Tangeri, Rabat, R. Consolato Casablanca, Posizione Siria 1/1, (Oggetto) Sitt Nur Bey Hamadah, Roma adde 30 Gen 1940 Anno XVIII. (signed: Butt [?]); Consolato di S.M. il Re d'Italia, Riservato, Telespresso N. 16 PR/48, Indirizzato a R. Ministero Affari Esteri Roma, e p.c. R. Ambasciata d'Italia Madrid, Oggetto: Sitt Nur Bey Hamadah, Riferimento: Telespresso ministeriale n.13/03981 del 30 gennaio u.s., Tetuan, Addi 12 marzo 1940 Anno XVIII [signed: illegible]; Ministero degli Affari Esteri, A.E.M. IIIo, Riservato – Personale, Appunto per il Comm. Leonini, [dated:] Roma, li 1 Maggio 1940 XVIII [unsigned].

It is not clear on the basis of the Italian documents if Nur Hamada ever made it to Spanish Morocco. Amin, however, did not get further than Madrid, where we met him first, walking into the Italian embassy claiming that he was on an official mission from the Spanish government. More than two weeks after this visit, in early July, Amin was still in Madrid and expressed his desire to the embassy to return to Italy by airplane. No one in Rome seems to have been too keen on having him back, though. When the embassy inquired whether to give him a visa despite the fact that he had a French passport from his earlier exile in the country, Rome replied that on principle, persons with French passports were not given access. After all, Italy had declared war on France in June. The foreign ministry recommended to treat Amin Hamada with politeness, while maintaining careful circumspection.³⁷ The last trace of Amin Hamada is a telegram the Italian ambassador sent to Rome less than a week later to report that the Spanish foreign ministry had asked if Amin Hamada should not be accompanied across the Pyrenees, given the circumstance that the propaganda activity, for which he had claimed he was in Spain, was called off. Otherwise, it might become prohibitively expensive to extend his stay at the Ritz in Madrid. Neither the Italian nor the Spanish fascist authorities seemed to be in the light about Amin Hamada's plans, but nevertheless he had been able to convince them to cover his bill for luxury accommodation. Now they were debating who would pick up the scraps and see to his departure from the country.³⁸

37 MAE Rome, AffPol, Siria, Busta 24: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Uff. AEM III, 19748, Telegramma in Partenza N. 1944688/308 [?] (Filo-Cifra), Indirizzato a R. Ambasciata Madrid, [dated:] Roma, li 10/7 1940 ore 19.45, Spedito da Veschiol. [?], [signed:] Guarnaschelli [?], (Testo) Vostro 325; [attached:] Telegramma in Arrivo, Decifrato da BG/Freschi, Cifra N23861 PR., (initials) Il Capo dell'Ufficio Cifra, Mittente: R. Ambasciata Madrid, [dated:] Madrid 8.7.40 XVIII ore 15.-, Roma, li idem ore 19.30, Assegnazione: A.E.M., Oggetto: Hamada Arnin [sic] – Siriano, [signed:] Zoppi. 325 – Per Ufficio III Dir. Gen. Europa Mediterraneo.

38 MAE Rome, AffPol, Siria, Busta 24: R. Ambasciata d'Italia, Telespresso N. 4494/1317, Indirizzato a 1) R.Ministero degli Affari Esteri = Roma, A.E.M. Ufficio IIlo, e, p.c.: 2) R.Consolato d'Italia = Tetuan, 3) Missione Militare Italiana in Spagna, Madrid, Posizione: Marocco.-, Oggetto: Amin Hamada, Referimento: 1) Telespresso ministeriale n.13/19673/C -Pos.Siria 1/1 – dell'11us. [July 11], 2) Telespresso di quest'Ambasciata n. 3926 del 22 giugno u.s., [dated:] Madrid, addi 16 luglio 1940 Anno XVIII, [signed: illegible].

Conclusion

At this point, the traces of Amin and Nur Hamada disappear, though future research might make it possible to tell a more complete version of their story. According to “family history” as relayed in DuBois and Amrani’s article, Nur later returned to Lebanon to live with her brothers. She died in Lebanon in 1962.³⁹ Apparently, the family tradition was silent about the Italian sojourn. The only author who has made a passing reference to it so far is Arturo Marzano in his history of Fascist Italian radio propaganda.⁴⁰

Until today, migrants, refugees, and exiled people like the Hamadas live under precarious circumstances at the margins of one, sometimes several societies. They show up in unexpected places, in localities where they should not be. Yet despite, or maybe because of the liminality of their existence, they leave traces in the archives. Like Nur and Amin Hamada, they are exploited, get in trouble with the authorities, become desperate for money and therefore have to enter alliances they otherwise would not have chosen. For the Hamadas this meant that they relied on their charms and the receptiveness of their audience for orientalist allure to gain attention and secure financial support. In an act of simulation, they created doubles of their hosts’ expectations. After her experience in the US, Nur was willing to go the extra mile to avoid a recurrence of the humiliation she had experienced, without being all too particular about her choice of partners, whether they were the League of Nations or Fascist Italy, which had derided and left the League in 1937.

The Hamadas’ experiences as exiles have been at the centre of this chapter as they were filtered through the archives of their host countries. Other archival researchers have certainly had similar chance encounters with individuals who stand out from the rest, not least because the document-generating authorities had a hard time categorising them and administering them away as Muslims, refugees, spendthrifts, or troublemakers. Many of these cases are tragic, yet some of them are not devoid of charm and humour. Nur and Amin Hamada’s story belongs in the latter category, and while it represents a pronounced case of opportunism, it is also a remarkable document of resilience and staying power in difficult times, coping with being stuck, betwixt and between.

³⁹ DuBois and Emrani 2008, 110.

⁴⁰ Marzano 2015.

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Part II: Defining and Controlling Islam in the Nation-State

Abdoulaye Sounaye

Governing Muslim Subjects in the Sahel

Deradicalisation and a State-Led Islamic Reform in West Africa

Abstract: This chapter focuses on deradicalisation, a concept and a practice that has become popular in initiatives that seek to govern Muslims in the Sahel. A key element in the vocabulary of the state and international organisations operating in the region, deradicalisation emerged in the last decade as a major social engineering project intended to reform Muslims and to rebirth them to positive values and norms. To this end, the deradicalised subjects are expected to “clean up”, “be treated”, “relax their views”, and embrace responsible citizenship. Espousing a developmentalist agenda and philosophy, deradicalisation translates into a strategy that tackles Jihadism and restores *good Islam*. Both curative and preventive, it is understood as the clinical intervention on both an ailing social body and a lunatic individual subject. That is why it targets individuals and specific groups, such as Imams, preachers, disenfranchised youth, and jihadi prisoners who are perceived as the social base and the main agents of radicalisation. What is the content of this curative intervention? How did this social engineering programme come to represent one of the main lenses through which Muslims are perceived today and in turn experience state policies? What is the interest of examining deradicalisation for an anthropology of Islam and Muslim life in the region? The chapter contends that Sahelian states have embarked on an Islamic reform project through deradicalisation programmes.

Introduction

On December 7, 2019, the evening news on *Télé Sahel*, Niger’s National television channel, devoted about 15 minutes to a graduation ceremony held in the town of Goudoumaria, in the south-east of the country. For the last few years, Goudoumaria and the region in general has been experiencing a jihadi insurgency led by the organisation Boko Haram¹. The ceremony was held to celebrate

1 Boko Haram also known as *Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād* is a jihadi group that was founded in north-east Nigeria in 2002. It is also referred to as the ‘Islamic State in West

the end of a deradicalisation training programme for some of the insurgents who repented, but most importantly to show how a programme funded by the Niger Government and its partners (EU and USA in particular) has been successful in driving young people out of an insurgency that has marred the whole Lake Chad region (Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria). The graduates were mostly young men who had joined Boko Haram to fight state rule and establish Islamic law and order in the region. After they repented, they were offered the opportunity to join a deradicalisation camp set up in December 2016 and where they enrolled in a vocational training programme intended to keep them from relapsing, after they were pardoned by the government and their communities. The reportage shows the graduates standing by their stalls displaying the various products and tools they made during the training. In the congratulatory greetings and gestures of the Niger Minister officiating the ceremony, one could read the satisfaction of an administration that claims that its initiatives to counter Islamic radicalisation are working and should be both supported and expanded. Ideologically ‘clean’, well dressed, and equipped with professional skills and a toolkit, the former insurgents looked ready for a fresh start in their respective communities. In the words of the Minister,

the effectiveness of this deradicalisation programme is right here in front of us, with 110 young people now ready to go to their communities and restart a normal life (...). They will all receive a certificate attesting that they have successfully completed a deradicalisation programme and for that reason constitute no major risk for the society. On their part, they will commit to stay away from any terrorist activities, to contribute to peace and security within their communities (...) and they will respect state laws and regulations. They will make this commitment by taking oath on the sacred Qur’an.²

Among the graduates were also 57 former insurgents from Nigeria, the neighbouring country where Boko Haram has represented an even greater threat to social cohesion and the rule of state law.

As the Minister’s statements show, deradicalisation has become a political concept, and a critical part of a government strategy designed to solve a radicalisation crisis inspired by Jihadism. I will argue that it has also become one of the powerful references in current policies that have sought to counter Jihadism in

Africa’. It is often viewed as the exemplar of extremism in the region and to which both the concepts of radicalisation and deradicalisation are applied.

² Discours, M. Bazoum: *Télé Sahel*, December 7, 2019.

the Sahel³. It illustrates how governments now concern themselves with Islam while facing an ideological, economic, and political process that has unravelled across the region and threatens the very foundations of the state. Furthermore, the idea, as the TV reportage shows, was to transform individual subjects who have radicalised, became ill-mannered, and dangerous for their communities and social order.

A concept increasingly used to account for developments and dynamics that involve Islam and claims of being Muslim, radicalisation is usually, if not equated, at least paired with ‘violent extremism’, another concept that made its way into the analytical frame used to understand the life conditions, trajectories, and experience of individuals fighting the central state and other social institutions. Those who radicalised and called for alternative governance and politics have found an important mode of expression and an avenue for both social and political action in the most recent Sahelian jihads. In those contexts, as the theory of radicalisation put it, various youth formations, ethnic groups, and socio-religious organisations have relied on violence to push for and achieve societal change.⁴

Interest in radicalisation, especially in religious contexts, has resulted in an expanding body of literature. Not surprisingly, in an era of war against Islamic terrorism, some of the most significant contributions to this literature come from the study of Islam and Muslim societies.⁵ From this perspective, radicalisation offers an opportunity to critically examine how Islam becomes entangled with local⁶ and global politics⁷, state institutions, and various socioeconomic processes characteristic of our times⁸.

In the way it has been thought of and used to characterise sociohistorical processes, radicalisation hardly stands alone. In most contexts, it has invited its twin sister: deradicalisation. While governments and international organisations stamp radicalisation with a negative connotation, seeing in it attitudes

³ The Sahel refers to the vast geographical area that extends from Djibouti to Senegal. Most of my discussion, though, will focus on the central part of the Sahel, i.e. Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali.

⁴ Anonymous 2012, Sagramoso 2012, Harmon 2014, Rabasa et al. 2010a, 157–80, Olomjobi 2015, Koehler 2016.

⁵ Kenney 2019, MacEachern 2018, Aghedo 2017, Aning 2017, Khosrokhavar 2017, Hentz and Solomon 2017, Perouse de Montclos 2017, Neumann 2013, Porges 2010.

⁶ Idrissa 2017, Seck 2010 and 2009, Launay and Soares 2009, Otayek and Soares 2007.

⁷ DeLong-Bas 2007, Meijer 2009

⁸ Meagher and Mustapha 2020, Ehrhardt and Umar 2020, Umar 2020, Harmon 2014, Scheele 2015.

and actions that disrupt and unsettle social order and political institutions, deradicalisation is thought of as a restorative response and a cure aimed at creating normality, or at least mitigating the potential of radicalisation to lead to crisis.

In this contribution, I offer a discussion on the attempts by governments in the Sahel region – mainly Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso – to respond to what they view as an Islamic radicalisation, to counter its subjects or to quell their influence all at once, and to “restore normal law and order”, as an official in northern Nigeria put it.⁹ Politics, government policies, and non-governmental interventions in the Sahel are now heavily shaped by a discourse that emphasises the urgency to counter radicalisation and find its antidote. As a consequence, deradicalisation has emerged as a key governance concept and a political agenda around which local governments, international organisations and agencies, the EU, and the USA are constantly rallying.

With the emergence of Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region in 2010 and the rise of jihadi groups in northern Mali in 2012, deradicalisation took the form of a state-led curative intervention, gaining currency in the regional discourse about Islam and Muslims, but also with initiatives that seek to govern Muslims in the Sahel region.¹⁰ In response to radicalisation, deradicalisation becomes a social engineering enterprise intended to reform Muslims and re-birth them to positive societal values and norms. To this end, the deradicalised subjects are expected to “clean up”, “relax their views”, and embrace responsible citizenship. Espousing a developmentalist agenda and philosophy, deradicalisation initiatives intend to counter violence and Jihadism and, in that sense, constitute a programme to restore *good Islam*. Both curative and preventive, deradicalisation is framed as the clinical intervention on an ailing social body and a lunatic individual subject with the aim of reasserting the authority of the state. That is why its programmes target primarily Imams, preachers, disenfranchised youth, and jihadi prisoners, the suspected subjects and agents of radicalisation. What is the content of this intervention? What does it say about governing Islam and Muslims today? What interest does the study of deradicalisation policies have for an anthropology of Islam and Muslim life in the region, and more generally for anthropology as an analytic endeavour? These are key questions that will interest a scholarly examination of Islam today.

Overall, I argue that while deradicalisation is changing the conditions of social and political governance in the region, it reads as a state-led Islamic re-

⁹ Ali, Zaria, interview by author, February 18, 2018.

¹⁰ Idrissa 2017, 2018.

form project that seeks to produce a Statist Islam¹¹ as opposed to jihadi Islam. In fact, in their efforts to alter the terms of the theological debate that led to the emergence of jihadi radicalisation and anti-state groups, and by resorting to ideological warfare¹², the empowerment of a specific socio-religious institution (Imams), a reorientation of religious cooperation (with Morocco), governments in the region are producing an Islamic reform of their own. State interventions give shape and substance to what in Francophone terminology one could call *un Islam d'état*. How this is happening is a question scholars of contemporary Islam should find interesting to ask in relation to the region, but also beyond.

In the first section, I offer a quick look at the background that helps to contextualise the discussion. Then, I move on to examine the ways in which both radicalisation and deradicalisation have become significant concepts in the politics of Islam in the Sahel. The third section discusses how the deradicalisation programmes seek to affect subjectivities and govern Muslims. The subsequent section relates this initiative to the state agenda to reform Islam, an act that would supposedly inspire convenient practices and understandings of Islam. In the last part, I draw some conclusions for the anthropology of Islam and the Sahel as the region becomes a key site of theorisation of Islam. This contribution builds on material collected mostly in the last three years as deradicalising jihadis became the main initiative to counter Islam-related violence and terrorism in the Sahel.

Background: A history of jihadism, turmoil and securitisation

For anyone familiar with the Sahel, this vast semi-arid region that extends roughly from Djibouti to Senegal, it should not be surprising that Islam serves as an ideological basis for the ongoing armed struggles in the region. Much like Marxism or Christianity in many other parts of Africa, Islam has been a major source of inspiration for various socio-political agendas. Political imagination in the region is significantly shaped by Islamic norms, references, and morality,

¹¹ Cf. Olaniyi 2011.

¹² “Guerre idéologique” is the term officials have often used to characterise the narratives of Jihadism, but also to frame their own responses. Cf. <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-02496930>, accessed December 28, 2020, <http://www.marianne.net/debattons/tribunes/comment-le-salafisme-pu-prosperer-au-niger>, accessed June 13, 2020.

especially with regard to governance.¹³ The Sokoto Caliphate¹⁴, the African Caliphate¹⁵, the Umariyan Jihad¹⁶, or the jihad revolutions¹⁷ are wordings scholars have used to characterise periods and historical processes of radical change that saw Islam become a dominant discourse and source of norms in the region. Over the centuries, Islam proved to be an ideological resource for both social cohesion and the struggle for regime change.¹⁸ Thus, contemporary jihadi claims to revolutionise the socio-political order by using Islam is not a new phenomenon in the Sahel. On the contrary, one only has to look at the jihads of the 19th century that transformed the moral economy of the region and established a number of emirates. From Cameroon to Senegal, for example, many of these political entities emerged after kings and local chiefs converted to Islam or after jihads arose to impose their political structures and modes of governance.¹⁹ Northern Nigeria, Central and Upper Niger, Senegambia and the Lake Chad regions, were all zones where jihads left their marks on political cultures, institutions, and communities.²⁰

Today, and much like the 19th century movements, Ansar Dine in northern Mali, Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region, and Ansaroul Islam in Burkina Faso, seek to rule by the law of God, illustrating a recurring political preoccupation and historical continuity across the region. From the millenarianist movement Maitatsine in 1980²¹ to the Groupe Salafiste pour la Predication et le Combat (GSPC), which later became Al Qaeda in the Maghreb, Islam was not only inspirational but also a mobilising force shaping social order.²² In a more formal constitutional politics and elective governance, the Front Islamic du Salut (FIS) of Algeria and the Sharianisation of Northern Nigeria remain powerful references for local groups and organisations that envisage Islam as the norm of

13 Holder and Dozon 2018, Gomez 2018, Idrissa 2017, Scheele 2015, Diouf 2013a, 1–35, Holder 2009, Lecocq 2010, Otayek and Soares 2007, Gomez-Perez 2005, Hunwick 1985.

14 Last 1967.

15 Sulaiman 2009.

16 Hanson and Robinson 1991, Hanson 1996, Lovejoy 2016, Pirio 2007.

17 Sulaiman 1986, Lovejoy 2016, Sounaye 2017.

18 Sanneh 2016, Hiskett 1994.

19 Idrissa 2017, Hamani 2007, Robinson 2000, Curtin 1971, Echenberg 1969.

20 Olomjobi 2015, Hiskett 1994, Djata 1996, Lovejoy 2016, Pirio 2007, Last 1967.

21 Maitatsine is an insurgent Muslim leader who gave his name to a millenarianist movement that rose up in 1980 to challenge the northern Nigerian society, and in particular the Muslim leadership, by claiming he was the Mahdi. A Boko Haram-like insurgency, the movement managed to gain support among disenfranchised migrants and youth before facing a military reaction that claimed thousands of lives.

22 Campana and Jourde 2017.

political order and the solution to the ills of society, including the corruption of the state system and its secularisation.²³

Though limited, this appeal of Islam to provide a new moral space and political opportunity became even stronger in the recent democratisation context.²⁴ In addition to what was referred to in many francophone contexts as *intégrisme*, new trends and forms of presence of Islam in the public arena emerged, complicating the appropriation and therefore the management of Islam and Muslim actors in the public space.²⁵ From Senegal to Niger, Islam took centre stage, prompting structural reconfigurations, ideological appropriations, and political articulations, which in certain cases have transformed the socio-political dynamics.²⁶

While these references tend to insist on the local and regional dynamics, more global influences must be noted, particularly from the 1990s onwards, when Islam became a major factor in global politics. In particular, the democratisation processes in the region opened up the possibility for a *civil Islam*²⁷ that was eager to play a role in the new political and religious dispensations.²⁸ The vivid and dynamic presence of Islamic organisations, Islam-inspired political activism (Niger, Mali, and Mauritania in particular), and the democratisation of Islamic authority, so to speak, added another layer to the already complex connections between religion and politics in the region.²⁹ Obviously, this trend is by no means specific to the Sahel, as parallels can be drawn with other regions of the (Muslim) world where similar dynamics have developed.³⁰

However, as far as the Sahel is concerned, I would argue that the appeal of Jihadism as an ideology that denies legitimacy to state secularism needs to be read against the backdrop of both the continuous challenge to the state's moral order and the constitution of alternative and non-state enterprises across the region, especially with the inability of the state to provide public services and the erosion of its authority. The rise of new anti-state forces and ideologies

²³ Holder and Dozon 2018, Holder and Sow 2014, Sounaye 2010.

²⁴ Schulz 2011, Seck 2010, Souley 2007, Zakari 2007, Samson 2005, Brenner 2001.

²⁵ Mesa 2017.

²⁶ Vitale 2018, Samson 2005, Diouf 2013a, LeBlanc and Gosselin 2016, Kendhammer 2016, Miran 2006, Kobo 2012, Idrissa 2017, Madore 2016, Mesa 2017.

²⁷ Cf. Hefner 2000.

²⁸ LeBlanc and Gosselin 2016, Diouf 2013b, Souley 2009, Holder 2009, Sounaye 2009, Gomez-Perez, LeBlanc, and Savadogo 2009, Miran 2006, Gomez-Perez 2005.

²⁹ Meagher and Mustapha 2020, Hernandez 2019, Lecocq and Niang 2019, Lecocq 2010, Bonnecase and Brachet 2013.

³⁰ Campana and Jourde 2017.

(cf. Boko Haram, Islamic State in west Africa, Al Qaeda in the Maghreb) has opened a window not only to “a strong antagonistic collective political will,” to use Gramsci’s words,³¹ but also to actors whose influence has challenged the state in its territorial markers and prerogatives to maintain order and stability. Decolonial politics, especially towards the former colonial power France, which still exerts a major influence in the region, the desire among a growing segment of the population to free themselves from secular elites and Western models of social development (family planning, education), and the activism of Salafi entrepreneurs seeking to remedy the moral corruption of the society, their main battleground, have fuelled current developments in the region, in particular Jihadism.³²

The wider context of the Sahel should also be read in relation to Libya, especially since 2011 and the regional implications of its civil war. Once a major influence in the region through Gaddafi’s hate-love relationships with the regional governments and armed groups, Libya has remained a key factor in socio-political developments across the region even during times of crisis. “Tout a commencé avec la chute de Khadafi”,³³ as an official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Niger argued. While this genealogy may be contested for dismissing other socio-political factors, it clearly draws attention to the impact the strife in Libya has had on the region. Both the ideas of a Sahelistan and Africanistan,³⁴ for example, are tied to what many have referred to as the *Libyan chaos*, the political and institutional instability that resulted from the civil war.³⁵

Certainly, these links and evocations need to be further historicised, extensively probed, and critically established. For now, it suffices to note them and emphasise the ways in which developments in the Sahel involve Islam and its jihadi appropriations, but are also affected by the intricate connections between these jihadi movements and regional politics, in particular in relation to Algeria and Libya.³⁶

A perspective on the people and the country must also highlight the fact that ‘crisis’ has been a recurring condition of the socio-political life of the region. Perhaps nothing has been more normal. From Tuareg and Tubu rebellions to civil war, draughts and economic hardship, to demands of autonomous

³¹ Gramsci 1971, 211.

³² Leblon 2019, Idrissa 2018, Thurston 2017, Sounaye 2017, Madore 2016, Kone-Dao 2005.

³³ “All began with the fall of Gaddafi.” (M. Ba, interview by author, February 2016).

³⁴ The suffix suggests that both the Sahel and Africa are turning into troubled zones.

³⁵ Laurent 2013, Michailof 2018.

³⁶ Both President Deby of Chad and President Issoufou of Niger have used the argument of the responsibility of NATO in the quasi-statelessness of Libya to rush in European military support.

governance, the region has experienced critical developments that have challenged the authority of the state as the guarantor of the social contract. For example, while armed groups may certainly have their own specific political, economic, and ethno-religious goals, they have regularly contested the state's monopoly of violence. As a result, non-state armed groups and actors have carried alternative governance³⁷ in many areas and sustained economies of war and smuggling.³⁸

In response to this challenge and this clearly disruptive dynamic, state authorities have opted for the militarisation of order by imposing a state of emergency, as is the case in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, and deploying armies to fight jihadi radicals. At the regional level, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger teamed up to create the G5 Sahel, a joint force supported mainly by France and the EU to fight armed groups, usually claiming to be jihadis. Around Lake Chad, Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria set up a similar military force to face the Boko Haram insurgency. New models of military cooperation emerged, aimed at sharing information and mutualising resources to create coordination between armies in their fight against terrorism and the disruptive effects of radicalisation. A key consequence of these developments has been to polarise communities and demonise groups, ethnic or religious, adding to the already tense intercommunal relations resulting from competition for resources. With *Sahelistan*³⁹ and *Africanistan*⁴⁰, the suggestions of a resemblance to Pakistan and Afghanistan, where governing Islam has become a major challenge, are clear; and as developments in the Sahel region have shown, these two suggestive references have resonated as an imperative for effective policies and concrete initiatives.

In general, and though a major part of the current *Africa in Crisis* narrative, the Sahel can hardly be imagined as a quiet land before the ongoing security issues and reconfigurations of the political order. It has a history of insurgencies and rebellions that have shaped social interactions, livelihoods,⁴¹ politics, and governance across the region, particularly in Niger and Mali.⁴² The formation of new state elites and 'nouveaux riches' through the state co-optation of former

³⁷ Lawel 2010, Lecocq 2010, Djibo 2002.

³⁸ Scheele 2015.

³⁹ Laurent 2013.

⁴⁰ Michailof 2018, Pérouse de Montclos 2016.

⁴¹ See <https://issafrica.org/research/books-and-other-publications/responses-to-boko-haram-in-the-lake-chad-region-policies-cooperation-and-livelihoods>, accessed February 10, 2021.

⁴² Leblon 2019, Lecocq and Niang 2019, MacNeil 2019, Raineri 2019, Rosato 2016, Boonecase and Brachet 2013, Lecocq 2010.

rebels and leaders of armed groups in the 1990s, for example, has remade the sociology of the state. On the fringes of the governments of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, quasi-governmental institutions emerged and offered former rebels a place and a ‘piece of the pie’. For many of these political entrepreneurs, rebellion has paid off, because it offered them an opportunity to become part of the system and expand forms of patronage that give new meanings to state administrative authority, but also to rebellion and insurgency. In Niger, for example, after the 1995 peace agreement, disgruntled groups of the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s formed the second Tuareg Rebellion in 2005 to impose a renegotiation intended for additional provisions for these groups. This strategy of being part of the system has led to new practices of state power, including trafficking, in which many former rebels now in positions of power appear to be involved. Warlords a decade ago, they have turned into drug lords, affecting both the moral and the political economy of governance in the region.

Radicalisation to deradicalisation in the Sahel

Academic and political discourses have applied the term radicalisation to social and political processes or even individual life trajectories, often to characterise attitudes and modes of action that seek to force change through violence and terrorism.⁴³ This use may be highly contested, but remains popular in reference to the Sahel and even beyond.⁴⁴ In the Sahel, it is now used to account for political contestation, revolts, and rebellions against established orders, as is the case with the religiously motivated insurgencies in the tri-border area (Niger-Mali-Burkina Faso), in northern Mali, and the Lake Chad region. As part of the lexicon of the study of social movements – and often paired with violent extremism – radicalisation has become a major trope in referring to the Sahel. This is partly because contemporary Jihadism in the region manifests itself through physical violence and armed struggles carried out by groups targeting political and state institutions. Imposing “the rule of Islam” and promising “a just order”, Jihadism appeals to youth, and rests primarily on a theological mobilisation that targets specific state institutions (the administration, the military, the

⁴³ Higazi and Brisset-Foucault 2013, Neumann 2013, Sommer 2012, Crettiez 2016, Kundnani 2012.

⁴⁴ Marchal and Salem 2018, Crettiez 2016, Crone 2016, Montclos 2016, El-Said 2015, Neumann 2013, Forstenzer 2012, Kundnani 2012, Sommer 2012, Rabasa et al. 2010a, Otayek 2000.

school system)⁴⁵ and authorities. Associated with a “war on education”,⁴⁶ it is then equated to a social, religious, and political process that threatens state governance and rule.⁴⁷

In the regions where I have conducted extensive research, in particular Niger and Northern Nigeria, the association between Jihadism, radicalisation, and violent extremism illustrates a key development in Muslim politics⁴⁸; but most importantly, it reflects the intricate relationship between local politics and contemporary appropriation of Islam in the region. What radicalisation means and how it is used may be debatable; applying the concept to Muslim groups and Islam in general may be reductive and raise other theoretical and conceptual issues; but its prevalence in the language used to speak and think about Islam-related processes in the region today is striking. This topicality has obviously given it a right to exist as an analytical concept, despite its pitfalls⁴⁹ and hence the need for social theory to address it. This is important to note because radicalisation also serves as a discourse that helps states in the region justify their policies, notably towards Islam and Muslims. In this context, and as the vignette at the beginning of this chapter shows, radicalisation calls for deradicalisation.

As the minister’s address suggests, in both its philosophy and deployment, deradicalisation is understood as both preventive and curative by the state and its supporters. In this case, and once applied to the region, it is part of a governance idea that focuses on the management of a threat with the goal to securitise Islam⁵⁰ and sanitise Muslims. In a context of war against Islamic terrorism, deradicalisation then offers legitimisation to state’s disciplinary measures and programmes to counter insurgencies and prevent further radicalisation, as the narrative goes. A particular feature of these programmes is that they remain

45 In 2019, UNICEF reported that school closures affected more than 400.000 students, partly due to the insecurity resulting from jihadi groups’ attacks on the school system. Cf. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/school-closures-sahel-double-last-two-years-due-growing-insecurity-unicef>, accessed February 10, 2021.

46 Cf. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/05/26/their-war-against-education/armed-group-at-tacks-teachers-students-and-schools>, accessed February 1, 2021. One may add the schools and the child victims of Boko Haram in Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Nigeria.

47 Last 2020, Umar 2020, Meagher and Mustapha 2020, Thurston 2018, Perouse de Montclos 2017, Sanusi 2007.

48 For more on the concept of Muslim politics, cf. Eickelman and Piscatori 2004, 3–24.

49 Pérouse de Montclos 2016, Harmon 2014, Marchal and Salem 2018, Anonymous 2012, Olo-mojobi 2015, Otayek 2000.

50 Cf. Mavelli 2012.

state-centred and as in other contexts, tend to emphasise that deradicalisation is not simply a “radicalisation in reverse”, but a long and challenging process “of changing an individual’s belief system, rejecting the extremist ideology, and embracing mainstream values.”⁵¹ Renouncing violence and embracing responsible citizenship, as the words of the Minister emphasised, and as it is expected from the deradicalised, is not a mere individual decision, especially because it has implications for the community. Since group dynamics are a factor and patronage and allegiance also play a role in radicalisation, deradicalisation programmes tend to consider diverse dimensions of communal life.

Consequently, the programmes take diverse forms, from ideological training,⁵² which is often understood as a cleansing process that focuses on affecting the character of the radicalised subject, to economic initiatives and the promotion of moderate views.⁵³ Geared toward combatting Islam-driven violent extremism and terrorism, deradicalisation programmes in the Sahel rely on public figures and influencers – mainly preachers and Imams – in their attempts to offer rebuttals of radical views and “exit strategies” to radicalised youth. In Mali, for example, with the support of the United Nation mission MINUSMA (The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) in the North, the government designed a preaching manual to help prevent radicalisation and violent extremism.⁵⁴ The document was intended as a vade mecum to Muslim preachers some of whom have been blamed for inciting radicalisation, violence, and terrorism, but whose support is also urgently needed in deradicalisation campaigns. A major step in the deradicalisation policy in Mali, the manual became a key component of a strategy that has inspired governments in the region.⁵⁵ Similar examples have been developed in Nigeria,⁵⁶ Niger, and Burkina Faso, often with a narrative that insists on the fact that “Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance, and those who challenge this view

⁵¹ Rabasa et al. 2010a.

⁵² Cheick Boureima Daouda, a prominent public figure in Niger and northern Mali, teams up with local and state institutions, but also with international organisations to provide training in deradicalisation, as his profile shows: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/cheikhboureima/>, accessed October 23, 2020.

⁵³ Baylocq and Hlaoua 2016.

⁵⁴ See <http://maliactu.net/mali-lutte-contre-lextremisme-violent-et-le-terrorisme-le-mali-vers-un-guide-de-preche-et-dadaptation-de-sermons/>, accessed October 23, 2020.

⁵⁵ Politique Nationale de Prévention et de Lutte contre l’Extrémisme violent et le Terrorisme au Mali.

⁵⁶ Cf. Development Initiative for West Africa: <http://diwafrica.org/donation/spreading-peace-in-multi-cultural-environment/>, accessed June 13, 2020.

are lost.”⁵⁷ The connection with Islam is even more pronounced in the narratives of deradicalisation programmes where both Boko Haram and the Jihadi of Northern Mali usually feature as the exemplars of radicalisation, because of their strict anti-state stands and the sharia rules they impose in the areas they conquer.

Accounts of radicalisation in Muslim contexts have insisted on the role played by the *cadres* in propagating radical views and even promoting violence.⁵⁸ Recognising the social position and the ideological influence of these actors, deradicalisation programmes in the Sahel have mobilised Muslim theologians and preachers to promote moderate views (mostly quietist), and therefore deradicalise. As the literature emphasises, this strategy⁵⁹ is not specific to the deradicalisation programmes of the region (Ashour 2009). In the Sahel however, governments have regularly pointed to the deficiency and the failure of Muslim leaders to “counter the use of Islam to radicalize.”⁶⁰ Both state officials and lay Muslims have blamed them for being too quiet, failing to oppose radical voices and defend Islam.⁶¹ The remedy for deradicalisation programmes is therefore to “better train and provide them with the communication tools to do their work.”⁶² One expert on the training of Imams goes so far as to argue that they need to be taught the Qur’an, theology, astrology, and communication skills so they can face the challenges of their time and environment.⁶³ Such views have contributed to several countries in the region developing cooperation with Morocco, a country that is now well positioned in deradicalisation programmes in the Sahel, as the next section of this chapter will show.

⁵⁷ Issa, interview by author, May 2017.

⁵⁸ Cf. Hegghammer (2010, 139), who points to recruitment by sermon in Saudi Arabia when, for example, scholars became engaged in Afghanistan after hearing a radical sermon. Deradicalisation programmes point to the role of Islamic scholars in radicalisation processes. Along the same line, deradicalisation programmes try to build on the influence of these *cadres* to combat radicalisation.

⁵⁹ NB, The Netherlands’ programme for training Imams in the 2000s. The first cohort of Imams graduated in 2003. Similar programmes exist now across Europe and Asia.

⁶⁰ Issa, interview by author, May 2017.

⁶¹ “Nous devons défendre l’islam.” Issa, interview by author, May 2017.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-pvcSbVt14>, accessed June 13, 2020.

A state-led Islamic reform: A theology of moderation

The way human subjects, social movements, and political actions are understood has consequences on the ways they are dealt with. That also goes for being Muslim, especially in the Sahel today. From its inception, the state in the region has been concerned with Islam and Muslim subjects, often devoting resources to formulate policies conscious of Islam and Muslim scholars, especially their potential to oppose or actively fight its agendas.⁶⁴ Both French and British colonialisms in the region have illustrated the permanence of Islam as a major factor in attempts to govern Muslims.

In promoting a “moderate Islam” or Moroccan *Wassatiya*⁶⁵, as opposed to Saudi Salafism, through active and institutional interventions aimed at changing the power relations within the Islamic sphere, deradicalisation policies are leading to an Islamic reform intended to empower moderate views, if not to win the ideological war (*la guerre idéologique*), then at least to minimise the social impact of a radicalisation process associated with Jihadism. Again, as the vignette illustrates, this reform relies on programmes that focus on youth mobilisation strategies; but it also stresses the training of Muslim scholars (*ulama*). As Umar (2020) argues, *ulama* have been instrumental in radicalisation processes, whether by providing a “climate of opinion” that helps to legitimise radical views, creating and rising tensions between groups, tapping into conspiracy theories and Muslim victimhood, or demonising others, Muslim scholars have played a major role in radicalisation processes. As key social influencers and *cadres* of Islam, it is understandable that deradicalisation strategies also target them.

With such a perspective on deradicalisation, it appears that the state is no longer willing to stay off a stage where its own existence seems to be at stake. That is in fact the policy line that should be read in the words of the Minister of Religious Affairs of Mali,⁶⁶ where he blames previous regimes for vacating the Islamic sphere, leaving it to its own arguments, competitions, rivalries, and

⁶⁴ Seck 2010, Hanretta 2009, Umar 2006, Soares 2005, Robinson 2000.

⁶⁵ *Wassatiyya* refers to an Islam away from the extremes and which praises itself for its balanced views. In the region, it is now referred to as an “Islam of the middle ground” (*un islam du juste milieu*).

⁶⁶ See <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/316679/societe/imams-maliens-formes-maroc-lis-lam-tolerant-face-wahhabisme-rigoriste/>, accessed February 10, 2021.

agendas, including those that subvert peaceful coexistence. Suggesting more involvement, he goes on to claim that the government will now fully engage the Islamic sphere and Muslim leaders to promote a tolerant Islam. Similar discourses have also become common in Niger and Burkina Faso, where, as in Mali, the issue was how to regulate Islam. This engagement with Islam then resonates as a positioning that is eager to trigger new dynamics that would promote a *Good Islam*. By investing in their deradicalisation initiatives, governments no longer seem intent on protecting the citadel of the secular from religious influence, a position that has been a major governance stance, especially in the Francophone countries of the region. Instead, governments are devising rules of engagement and developing strategies to treat “the jihad madmen”, the “lost subjects who have strayed from peace and good citizenship”.⁶⁷

It is worth noting that as these developments unfold, and unlike 20 years ago for example, governments in the region are now ready to accommodate religious views in the political arena;⁶⁸ but only the “good ones”.⁶⁹ As they promote learned leadership and fund training programmes, they also note that they “will work to unify and reconcile [Muslims] and train other [Imams to promote] a peaceful Islam; an Islam of peace that respects others (...); a tolerant and open Islam”⁷⁰ because “the goal is a behavioural change among practitioners of the religion that has been revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (PUH) and which has been soiled by the isolated acts of extremists who have nothing to do with Islam, a religion of peace.”⁷¹

67 “Les fous du jihad”, M. Ali., paper presented at “Forum sur Boko Haram”, University of Diffa 2016. Indeed, the characterisation of Boko Haram insurgents as madmen has been one of the talking lines used to disown them and counter their mobilisation efforts, especially among youth in the Lake Chad region.

68 It must be noted that despite this move, it has not always translated into a significant influence on the Islamic sphere. The recent developments with the *Conseil Islamique* in Mali are telling. The president of this institution, Mahmoud Dicko, has become one of the fiercest critics of the government and democratisation policies. In the last few years, he managed to establish himself as a ‘counter-government’ force. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/749997/societe/mali-mahmoud-dicko-la-democratie-representative-quon-nous-impose-ne-fonctionne-pas-chez-nous>, accessed October 23, 2020.

69 See <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/316679/societe/imams-maliens-formes-maroc-islam-tolerant-face-wahhabisme-rigorige/>, accessed October 23, 2020.

70 See <https://niarela.net/religion/formation-des-imams-maliens-au-maroc-les-cent-premiers-stagiaires-font-le-point>, accessed October 23, 2020.

71 “L’objectif est de parvenir à un changement de comportements chez les pratiquants de la religion révélée du Prophète Mohamed (PLS) qui est aujourd’hui entachée par les actes isolés

With a religious diplomacy that positioned itself as a promoter of a moderate Islam (*al wassatiya*), Morocco emerged as a key ally of governments in the Sahel in their search for a reformed Islam. In fact, the Institut de Formation des Imams Mohammed VI of Rabat has trained several thousands of preachers and Imams from across the Sahel since 2012.⁷² In 2018 alone, the Institute trained 500 Imams and preachers from Mali. Thus, part of the continuities, the influence of Morocco has taken a new institutional form. While traditionally, the relationship between the Sahel and Morocco has been nurtured through informal networks and Sufi organisations whose connections date centuries, today, however, deradicalisation initiatives have opened another avenue of cooperation, offering official channels between the two partners, repositioning the Kingdom as the key partner in the theological offensive needed to deradicalise the Sahel.

Morocco's branding of its 'middle ground' Islam (*islam du juste milieu*) has apparently made an impact on local governments and initiatives as they distance themselves – at least to some extent – from Islamic cooperation partners, such as Qatar or Saudi Arabia. Radicalisation inspired by Salafi-Jihadi ideas costing these two influencers some of their reputation, especially in Mali, Chad, and Burkina, the repositioning of Morocco is important enough to note, as it points to the configurations of the Islamic sphere, affects policy lines, and at the same time alters the terms of the debate on both radicalisation and the strategies to combat it. For one, with the involvement of Morocco, deradicalisation relies on equipping key and influential actors such as Imams⁷³ with the theological tools they need, if not to win arguments against radicals, but at least to counter some of their views that have become popular mainly through Saudi Salafism. In this context, the Islamic reform that Sahelian governments now promote is about embracing what officials themselves have called *islam du juste milieu*, a concept that conveys both the avoidance of extremes and the cultivation of a middle and common ground.

Generally speaking, when scholars discuss Islamic reform, they usually focus on the religious actors, concentrating primarily on the internal dynamics and analysing theological debates and arguments. Although they recognise that

des extrémistes qui n'ont rien avoir avec l'Islam qui est une religion de paix." See <http://info-matin.ml/formation-des-imams-maliens-au-maroc-les-stagiaires-sexpliquent-sur-futur-mission/>, accessed October 23, 2020.

⁷² See <http://www.eurasiareview.com/28112016-moroccos-religious-diplomacy-in-africa-well-timed-royal-initiative-oped/>, accessed June 13, 2020.

⁷³ See <https://www.bladi.net/maroc-formation-imams-maliens,51154.html>, accessed April 15, 2020.

some external factors and actors might play some role, their perspectives show that the impetus for reform comes from within the Islamic sphere.⁷⁴ As I have shown, one must add to these studies of Islamic reform in the region the state-sponsored Islamic reform that is unfolding in the Sahel today mainly through deradicalisation programmes.

An anthropology of (Islam in) the Sahel

Paying scholarly attention to radicalisation and deradicalisation in the Sahel could be theoretically stimulating, conceptually rewarding, and certainly offers an opportunity to re-examine Islam in light of the new reconfigurations of power and authority at work in the region. The remapping and recalibration of the role of the state as a religious actor in its own right with the aim of promoting a particular religious trend not only affects the concepts of Islam and being Muslim, but also creates political categories that assign specific identities and status, some of which are unwanted, rejected, and even violently combatted. Whether promoted or demonised, such categories end up calling for particular governing strategies while producing subjectivities that political authority or simply historical contingencies might pitch against each other. Thus, what the ongoing radicalisation processes and deradicalisation initiatives have offered us is both an opportunity to observe a reconstruction of an object called Islam, but also a terrain of and for anthropology, since this process affects human beings. Here, it goes without saying, that both radicalisation and deradicalisation are processes centred on ideas and the transmission of values that can be uprooting for the individual and destabilising for the community and the state.

Obviously, it takes more than a few paragraphs to systematically and satisfactorily address the epistemic implications of these developments for our academic perspectives. However, I felt compelled at this juncture to at least point to some of the possible ways in which scholars of Islam and academics, who have developed interest in the region, can think of the (anthropological) study of both Islam and the Sahel. Elsewhere, I have already referred to the category of Sahelian Islam,⁷⁵ which arises from the demand to consider contemporary local appropriations of Islam, but also from the influence of new articulations between

⁷⁴ Loimeier 2016, Iddrisu 2012, Kobo 2012, Samson 2005, Niezen 1987, Kane 2003.

⁷⁵ See <https://blogs.alternatives-economiques.fr/florence/2010/11/15/islam-au-niger-de-la-contestation-a-la-normalisation-12>, accessed April 15, 2020.

Islam and the state in the region. The assumption here is that this process has a major impact on how we theorise the region, but also how we factor in Islam-related dynamics, especially in a world where Islam and being Muslim have become major signifiers for individual subjects, authorities intending to govern them, but also for geopolitical reasons. Islam playing a key role in the geopolitics of our time, the significance of Jihadism as a social factor and an influencer in government strategies cannot be overlooked.

The academic engagement I evoke here is also an additional avenue for understanding Muslim arguments and therefore for theorising the dynamics of the Muslim Worlds, starting from the Sahel. In this specific case, the engagement opens a window onto the politics of religion, in particular how certain logics and policies shape Islam and produce not only political concepts but also subjects.⁷⁶ In this respect, and especially because radicalisation and deradicalisation are problematic and resonate as processes and initiatives that produce subjects, they should be welcome in an anthropology of the Sahel, as a recent publication on Boko Harma has shown.⁷⁷ What kind of Islam or Muslim does the state produce in that context? Deradicalised ones? How do people react to these constructs? How is Islam constituted in this process? But most importantly, what interactions and subjects result from these definitions and conceptualisations of Islam?

As we contextualise them, we may realise that these preoccupations are not only problematic for an anthropological engagement with contemporary Islam; they are very much part of the story of the state as a government idea, an institution that seeks to govern and establish regimes and order. Indeed, deradicalisation programmes help us uncover modes of policing Islam that rests primarily on reforming individual subjects, groups, and communities. What happens to these entities then? Placing such a question at the centre of our inquiry helps us to advance a critical anthropology of the state, an institution that has proven to be an authoritative force, a maker of law and order, and a normative idea. Picking up the title of a recent publication,⁷⁸ I would point out that the various forms that jihadi radicalisation and state deradicalisation policies are taking in the Sahel are part of the *state at work*; not so much how the state bureaucracy works or functions, but what personal, social, and political experiences the state leads to and imposes on its subjects. Its current contestations by jihadis

76 Holder and Dozon 2018, Luizard 2006, Cantone 2005, Sounaye 2005, Sow 2005.

77 Ehrhardt and Umar 2020, Last 2020, Meagher and Mustapha 2020, Umar 2020.

78 In particular Bierschenk 2014, Bierschenk and Olivier De Sardan 2014a, Bierschenk and Olivier De Sardan 2014b; Blundo 2014; Hamani 2014.

must then be read as part of an ongoing argument about the social contract on which it theoretically rests, and how it ought to operate and perform as a public institution.

Contemporary Salafi-Jihadism defined as a modality of radicalisation, as the literature has put it, has made the nexus of Islam and the state in the Sahel even more intricate, illustrating the connections and specially the conflicts between normative orders. Until recently, the main orders competing with each other were those inspired by the state and those informed by the so-called traditional/customary rule. Among the current orders today, one has to count the emerging ones ushered by both Jihadism and rebellion, in particular those led by Tuareg and Tubu groups in Mali, Chad, and Niger. As a radical critique of the state and its order, Jihadism offers a fresh opportunity to examine the politics of the state, but also the political economy that has prompted such an institution, which has made it appealing to some, but also a symbol of violence and domination for others. Before it was armed, rebellious, and terrorist, Jihadism, for example, was quiet and quietist. Of course, today, the very understanding of Jihadism and quietism in social and political contexts make them exclude one another. What ideological conditions and developments have made this possible, and how both established and emerging authorities are dealing with such developments, are central questions that need to be asked if one wants to understand the reconfigurations resulting from state governmentality and Jihadism.

This is relevant because when states in the Sahel region design and support deradicalisation programmes that pit one group against the other (Moderates/Radicals, Sufi/Salafi, Quietist/Violent), we must ask what political, social, and religious dynamics emerge from these interventions? When securitisation policies target specific socio-religious categories, behaviours and practices, which political subjectivities do they favour, alter, or inform? Where does the promise and the commitment of the state lie? What happens to its social contract? Obviously, these questions are not only pertinent to the Sahel, but also for other parts of the (Muslim) world where radicalisation has called for deradicalisation.

The point is that when it comes to analysing Islam-related radicalisation and deradicalisation programmes, the Sahel now offers the opportunity for a cross-cultural comparison with other regions such as the Middle East, South East Asia, Central Asia, but also Europe, where state sponsored deradicalisation programmes have become part of the practice of dealing with dissent, contestation, and political struggles. Before the Sahel, deradicalisation programmes were well established in Europe, especially in France, the United Kingdom, and

the Netherlands.⁷⁹ Building on this historical reference, an anthropology of deradicalisation might contextually ask how people actually radicalise or deradicalise themselves? The structure and the content of the deradicalisation programmes, as well as the strategies they use, here again offer a window onto the perceptions of radicalisation and the means of countering it, or at least mitigating its impact.⁸⁰ In that regard, by proposing a policy-oriented anthropology of Boko Haram, Mustapha and Meagher (2020) illustrate a continuity in the academic engagement with the Sahel. Indeed, they have contributed to a subfield of the anthropology of development that has recorded important work, some of which have been shaping the interventions of the state and international agencies across Africa for decades.⁸¹

When reflecting on the added value of the recent examinations of Islam and Muslim life in the Sahel,⁸² perhaps one of the key questions is then: How do these contributions help us refine both our representations of this region and the theorisations of its social and political dynamics, including Jihadism? This is an important question in a context where the region has become a site from which scholars and politicians have sought to think and rethink Islam, often giving it an African flavour and distancing it from say the Middle East, which has allegedly produced an Islam of contestation and jihad.

There is no doubt that scholarly engagement with the region has exploded in recent years, in part due to its current experiences of Jihadism, but also due to renewed interest in Islam and Muslims across academic disciplines. The conjunction of these factors has made conceptualisations of Islam part of the social theory of the Sahel, a development that has also been gradually reconfiguring the way the region is thought of and repositioned in geopolitical terms.⁸³ A concern with the value of these contributions – and the forms of scholarship they produce – can hardly go without also asking the question of *who* is defining Islam and *who* is producing this scholarship.

⁷⁹ Rabasa et al. 2010c.

⁸⁰ Meagher and Mustapha 2020.

⁸¹ Hoechner 2018, Michailof 2018, Flynn and Tinius 2015, Juris 2015, Bompani and Frahm-Arp 2010a, Bompani and Frahm-Arp 2010b, Graveling 2010, Olivier de Sardan 1995.

⁸² Hill 2018; Renne 2018, LeBlanc and Gosselin 2016, Schulz 2011, Masquelier 2009.

⁸³ We can mention here how the Sahel has become part of the US strategy to combat terrorism, but also Europe's efforts to quell the migration trends that have affected its countries in the last decade.

Conclusion

In emphasising the ways in which deradicalisation prompts the imagining of a particular Muslim category that needs to be dealt with and sanitised, this contribution wanted to point to an aspect that has often been overlooked in the accounts of Islamic reform in the region:⁸⁴ Islamic reform as a state agenda and project. This is important to highlight, especially because in most Sahelian countries and following the colonial model, the state has systematically defended secularity, making itself the prime servant and guardian of this normative framework. In the past, in Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, despite diverging political trajectories, the state has regularly claimed secular principles and logic, leaving religion to churchmen and Imams. In contrast, state interventions today challenge this line, as governments seek to produce not only citizens, but subjects with particular religiosity. The time of standing its secular ground has apparently ended, as deradicalisation programmes and the desire to restore the authority of state institutions prompt proactive religious policies and the assertion of a statist Islam. This process, as I have argued, illustrates how states are engaging in an Islamic reform project, a new reality that should be of interest to the anthropology of the Sahel, but also of Islam and Muslim life today.

This contribution intended also to draw attention to the experience of Islam and Muslims in the Sahel and how this experience feeds the construction of Islam. In other words, through various academic and political engagements, the Sahel becomes a site of theory that connects anthropology as a discipline involved in theorising human experience, and Islam as a source of normative socio-political order. How then do scholars engage with this relationship and situate the region within the intellectual history of anthropological endeavours? Translated into the historical context of this contribution, the concern then is how would this way of interrogating social science shape the future of academic engagement with Islam and the Sahel? With these questions, one really sees how both the Sahel and anthropology become academic terrains.

⁸⁴ Loimeier 2016, Holder and Dozon 2009, Bregand 2007, Soares and Otayek 2007, Otayek 2000, Masquelier 2009, Kobo 2012, Villalón 2006.

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Britta Frede

In an Era of Terror Threats

Negotiating the Governance of a (Trans)Local Islamic Heritage in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania

Abstract: This chapter scrutinises the negotiation of various actors about the governance of the Mauritanian Islamic heritage. In the context of hopes for democratisation and the war on terror, social frictions are fuelled and lead to a quite confrontational mode of negotiating identity and citizenship. The traditional Islamic educational institution, the *maḥḍara*, plays a crucial role within these debates. Being perceived as an institution for (re)producing local tradition, the *maḥḍara* and its visions become the focus of conflict, praised by politicians and the ‘*ulama*’ (Islamic scholars) as a driver of social peace, feared by security experts as a breeding ground for terrorism, and finally, wished to be reformed by human right activists. The war on terror goes hand in hand with the threat of terror, producing more rumours than facts and spreading feelings of insecurity that foster violent action.

Introduction

[T]he places of worship and their related institutions, in particular the *maḥḍara*-s, which are made for the dissemination of knowledge, meditation, and prayers of the faithful must benefit from a sustained interest to consolidate (the fibre of) the unitary fabric and the social segments of the country. It is in these institutions where sentiments of the purity of the soul, Islamic brotherhood, social cohabitation and national solidarity between the citizens of the same country are raised and developed.

In fact, Islam must continue to be a constant source of inspiration for our way of thinking and acting. Islam condemns in its discourse as well as refutes in its practice obscurantism, intolerance, and extremism that spreads doubt and violence among the Muslim community, totally foreign to our traditions. Instead, Islam advocates social peace and peaceful co-existence between human beings.

Islam must continue to serve as a basis not only for our education and for our culture, but also for our youth, to avoid ostentatious excesses and fantasies of temptation. Islam must further serve as an irreplaceable legislative framework, a moral which organises our vision

of life and regulates our well behaving by imposing on us a passion for work, respect for the neighbour, (...).¹

Islam in Mauritania is an important issue in public discourse. Seen as the glue that holds the plural society together, Islam has often been interpreted as the only common reference point on which an idea of national unity could be built on.² In such kind of debates, Islam serves as a container, as a term with which various ideas within the country's political landscape are promoted. Despite being a religious practice, embedded in this case within a Sunnī Mālikī Ash'arī doctrine with which most Mauritians are raised, Islam has become a highly politicised topic, especially since the 'global war on terror' has drawn Mauritania into the circle of US allies fighting 'Islamic extremism'. As illustrated in the citation at the beginning of this chapter, the author El Haycen – a Mauritanian political scientist – defines Islam as beneficial for the Mauritanian society. According to his view, it brings peace and harmony to the society while preventing the youth from making serious mistakes. He sees Islam as the regulative measure for a good society. It has produced institutions, like the *maḥḍara* (Arabic: traditional institution of Islamic education),³ that consolidates the society by educating the people to become good Muslims and citizens alike. The values taught by such an institution stand, that is what El Haycen claims, in stark contrast to the bad citizen, the one who is obscurantist, intolerant, extreme, and spreads doubts and violence. If we read his lines against the background of the violent actions justified with reference to Islam, we understand that his text does not only define Islam in a certain way, it also defines what Islam is not about, and that activists who use violence in the name of Islam do not belong to Mauritanian traditions, they are foreign.

In this chapter, I will have a closer look at the Mauritanian Islamic heritage and the public negotiation about what this might be. A special focus is laid on how the Mauritanian Islamic heritage should be governed in the Era of a 'global war on terror'. The chapter aims at illustrating how the threats of terror produce

1 El Haycen 2016, 232. Translated from French into English.

2 Pazzanita 1999, 44.

3 The term 'traditional Islamic education' as a descriptive terminology for the *maḥḍara* understands 'traditional' as a dynamic process. The *maḥḍara* is a practice that claims to have its roots in the Prophetic past. This past is mediated into the presence to build up the future. This process of mediating ideas and spiritual practice into the presence is a transformative process adapting to its cultural, social, and historical setting. Therefore, the term 'traditional', in my understanding, claims a static authenticity, yet it is also a highly dynamic and transformative practice.

substantial debates concerning identity issues and local hegemonies. The governance of the Mauritanian Islamic heritage is hereby understood as a complex and multi-layered process of regulation.⁴ Such a process is not limited to state-implemented regulations only. Rather, various processes of self-regulation within the Mauritanian society are the focus of this chapter. These processes are fostered by diverse social actors negotiating definitions of a Mauritanian Islamic heritage. Moreover, such processes contain hegemonic struggles between state authorities, various religious authorities, and social activists. I will argue that the dynamics of the intra-Mauritanian negotiations on the definition of Mauritanian Islamic heritage are gradually evolving towards a more confrontational discourse in the context of socio-political activists' and intellectuals' hopes for a transition to democratisation and Mauritania's integration into the 'global war on terror'. It would not be in the interest of this chapter to define ever ambiguous and contested terms such as terrorism, or to classify various acts of violence committed or defined as such. Instead, I look at the phenomena of terrorism from the perspective of the threat it poses. It is not the terrorist act itself that proves so powerful, but the threat posed by its occurrence, which in turn creates a certain atmosphere of tension and fear that fosters debates about the nature and defining characteristics of Mauritanian Islam. It appears that under the threats of terror more resolute arguments are raised that either serve to weaken a Mauritanian Islamic heritage in order to overcome traditions that are perceived as preventing democracy and social equality; or to strengthen it in order to achieve stability by defining Islam in contrast to destabilising measures that contradict local traditions. By an examination of representations of, positions towards, and regulations about the *maḥḍara* as one of the most representative example of the Mauritanian Islamic heritage, I will show how social frictions in Mauritanian society are becoming increasingly tense in the context of hopes for a democratic transition and the threat of terror.

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania – a successful regional leader of counter-terrorism

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania lies on the western edge of the Sahara and borders the Atlantic Ocean, Morocco, and Algeria to the north, Mali to the east, and Senegal to the south. The country's population is composed of various ethno-

⁴ Maussen, Bader, and Moors 2011, 15–18.

lingual groups, the Ḥassāniyya speakers (an Arabic dialect) of Arab and Berber origins often called Moors, or in the local vernacular *bīḍān*. Further, the society comprises sub-Saharan African minorities, such as Wolof, Soninke, Pulaar, and Bambara speakers. In addition, the ethno-linguistic divide intersects with the identities of social status groups. Such identities might have been fluid in pre-colonial times but have become more fixed entities during the late 19th century and led to an emphasis on predominantly patrilineal kinship within structures of social inequality.⁵ However, in post independent Mauritania, the emergence of elites cannot be understood exclusively along the lines of kinship. Individual biographical trajectories of contemporary political elites, for example, demonstrate that social positioning in contemporary Mauritania is much more in flux than public discourse of some academics, activists, and human right organisations might suggest.⁶ Still, educational reforms have favoured certain ethno-lingual and social status groups, especially the Arab *zwāyā* (Ḥassāniyya: social status group of Islamic scholars) from the Adrar, Trarza, and Brakna region (south-western Mauritania) to maintain a strong influence within Mauritania's political, cultural, and economic elite.⁷ Social tension of varying degrees between Ḥassāniyya speakers and sub-Saharan African minorities have been reported in the past and present, as have tensions between social status groups, especially among the Ḥassāniyya speakers, their elites, especially the *zwāyā*, and their former slaves called Ḥarāṭīn.⁸ Social inequality, expressed in structural and institutional discrimination that limits the share of economic or political participation and public resources, affects these two groups in particular, according to numerous national and international human right associations: Ḥarāṭīn and sub-Saharan African minorities.

Nevertheless, as this brief introductory sketch on Mauritania already emphasises, the heterogeneous Mauritanian society contains several potential socio-political lines of conflict that complicate the analysis of socio-religious and socio-political transformation processes. Economic and ecological challenges as well as a political struggle to overcome the authoritarian rule by the military are also prominent themes in Mauritania's recent history.⁹ Since its independence in 1960, the country has witnessed a number of coups. A coup in

⁵ Villasante-de Beauvais 1998, Villasante-de Beauvais 2000, 286, Villasante Cervello 2004.

⁶ Ould Ahmed Salem 1998.

⁷ Ould Cheikh 1998.

⁸ Diallo 1993, Fleischmann 1994, Boye 1999, Ciavolella 2010, McDougall, Brhana, and Ruf 2003.

⁹ Ciavolella 2009, Foster 2011.

1978 ended seventeen years of presidential rule and put Mauritania under military rule until 1992, when the country's first multi-party elections were held. However, the introduction of a multi-party system in the country did not lead to substantial political change, especially as the military elite maintained its grip on political control in the country. Examples include President Ould Taya remaining in power until his removal in August 2005. A military council that oversaw a transition to democratic rule took over for another two years, and in April 2007, a first democratically-elected government under President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi was inaugurated.¹⁰ However, after sixteen months in power, the President was overthrown again by a military coup led by General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. One of the justifications was Ould Cheikh Abdallahi's alleged incapacity to maintain security in the country.¹¹ Ould Abdel Aziz was elected president in July 2009 and directly declared that he would focus on concerted counter-terrorism measures. He remained in power until August 2019, when the president Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, again a former general, won the elections with an absolute majority. Both generals – Ould Abdel Aziz and Ould Ghazouani – were implicated in both previous coup d'états. They represent a faction of old networks of the military regime that is mainly committed to the reintegration of the country into international politics after Mauritania's isolation due to its support of Saddam Hussein during the US military intervention in Iraq in 2003.¹²

The political turbulences of the last fifteen years were accompanied by a number of violent attacks allegedly attributed to GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) and after 2005 to their successor organisation AQIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb). Between 2005 and 2011 various smaller attacks were carried out on the Mauritanian territory. These include clashes with the army, hostage-taking and the killing of Western foreigners, and attempts to attack symbolic public places, in particular the French embassy, whose compound also includes the French Cultural Centre and a French school. There have been no attacks attributed to terrorism since 2011, but the threat of terror looms large. The sudden discontinuity and lull in terrorist attacks has, on the one hand, created rumours about a secret agreement between the regime of Abdel Aziz and al-Qaeda¹³ and, on the other hand, allowed the regime to celebrate its successes and its efficient counter-terrorism strategies. Human rights organisation protest that this strategy contained arbitrary arrest without due processes

¹⁰ For the awakening of the civil society during his rule, see Ciavolella and Fresia 2009.

¹¹ Jourde 2011, 5.

¹² Bisson 2013, 168.

¹³ Hosenball 2016.

of young suspects from poor social classes.¹⁴ They further reported that the confessions of the detainees were often obtained through torture and other forms of coercion.¹⁵ In 2018, the head of the DSE (Direction de la Sûreté de l'État), Sidi Ould Baba al-Hacen, praised the success of Mauritania's counter terrorism strategies in a public interview. He emphasised that the success was due to the combination of military and security measures as well as ideological, religious, legislative, and socio-economic ones. According to him, this strategy has – after nearly ten years of implementation – led to positive results: the control of Mauritania's vast desert borders, securing the territory and population, the dismantling of all 'sleeping cells', arresting 650 suspects and their prosecution before courts of law, the reintegration of repentant terrorists, and the curbing of further attacks on national territory since 2011.¹⁶ A month after this interview, the Mauritanian general Hanena Ould Sidi took over the head of the G5 security force. The G5 is a regional multilateral organisation established in 2014, consisting of Mali, Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania, working together with the support of international donors with the aim of improving governance, infrastructure, agriculture, youth employment and, above all, security in the Sahel region.¹⁷

The threats of terror

Until the 1980s, terrorism was more or less absent in the Mauritanian criminal code. On July 9, 1983, a law was enacted that aimed at preventing coup d'états. This law condemned in a general manner any acts against state authorities and the integrity of the national territory. It was this law that was modified in July 2005 and adapted to fight terrorism along new, globally envisioned lines. Therefore, the term 'terrorism' was introduced into the legal text and defined in a vague way that theoretically takes no consideration for violations of human rights. It literally allowed for a definition of a flexible broad range of 'anti-state' activities as terrorism. Moreover, the law went beyond proscribing attacks

¹⁴ For the reports on torture, see Amnesty International 2013. For the social composition of detainees in Mauritanian prisons imprisoned for terrorism, see Ould Ahmed Salem 2013, 161.

¹⁵ Ould Ahmed Salem 2013, 161. Torture practice for confessions of terrorism has been reported already from the period 2005–2008, see i.e. Amnesty International 2008, Foks, Laurion, and Messaoudi 2007.

¹⁶ Aidara 2018.

¹⁷ Airault 2018.

against the nation-state but included activities such as recruiting, training, and planning of terrorist acts on the national territory that hints at targets within the country or abroad.¹⁸ The anti-terrorism law of 2005 eventually proved to be ineffective, therefore, in 2010, this law was replaced by a new version enlarging the capacity of the state to fight terrorism, but its vague definition of terrorism remained the same.¹⁹

Nevertheless, even though anti-terrorism laws are employed against social activists as well, the violation of human rights and restrictions to free speech and social activism did not start with the introduction of these laws in Mauritania. According to Freedom House, an organisation that has a special focus on civil liberties and political rights, Mauritania is classified as “not free” since 1973, and only during the two short periods of 2001–03 and 2006–08 its status raised to “partly free”.²⁰ Therefore, it is not surprising that other social activists experienced detentions during the last decades. The most famous example is Biram Dah Ould Abeid (b. 1965), the head of the IRA (Initiative pour la Résurgence du mouvement Abolitionniste) who ran as presidential candidate in the elections in 2014 and 2019 with increasing success.²¹ In 2015, Ould Abeid and two fellow human rights defender, Brahim Bilal and Djiby Sow, were “charged under the anti-terrorism laws for belonging to an illegal organisation, leading an unauthorised rally, and violence against the police”.²² Still, I would like to argue that the problem of the terror threats is not simply the establishment of legal frameworks to counter terrorism. The main problem is the vague frame that the nebulous existence of terror produces. A terror whose actors cannot be easily identified, whose motivations are not clearly understood, and whose beginning and ending is ill definable. Since 2011, no violent attack happened on the Mauritanian territory but the Mauritanian government continuously informs its population through state-controlled media about threats of terror. Such information is especially given after 2009, so after the high number of terror attacks on Mauritanian territory. This climate of impending threats of terror is further maintained by the international media that regularly refers to the insecurity within Mauritania. It was only in 2018 that France and other countries began to lift the travel advisories that has discouraged tourists from visiting since 2007, when

¹⁸ Foks, Laurion, and Messaoudi 2007, 13.

¹⁹ Tamburini 2018, 1241–43.

²⁰ Freedom House 2012. More about the pros and cons of such measurement of democracy and the specific methodology of Freedom House, see Höglström 2013.

²¹ Topona 2019.

²² *The Guardian* 2015.

French travellers had been shot on the road near Aleg (Brakna, southwest Mauritania).²³ Jourde warns against oversimplifying the complexity of the problem of insecurity in the Sahel, where local, national, and regional dynamics often intersect.²⁴ This is not to say that there are no security threats at all, but as Jourde convincingly argues, we need to keep in mind that the role of security is often played out by local elites to uphold their rule.²⁵ The ‘security argument’ can serve the regimes in power to command greater authority.²⁶ In the meantime, it seeks and leads to the establishment of international support for such authoritarian rulers in the Sahel.²⁷

From vague information about the reality of the terror threat to the undefined and steadily shifting boundaries between ‘moderate Islamists’ and ‘extremists’, the destructive power of terror threats lies in the state of insecurity they create in people’s minds. Vium looks at the effects of fear spread by the possible existence of terrorism in Oualata, an oasis town in eastern Mauritania that lies within what the French government has defined as a “red zone” of high risk border regions.²⁸ He emphasises that the “nebulous nature of AQIM and the way ‘it’ produces terror in the minds of the local population represents a – if not the most – significant threat, which may progressively undermine the fabric of society itself”.²⁹ Such fear is not only present in regions classified as being at high risk but also in the rest of the country. From 2005 to 2008, when a series of violent incidents happened that were classified as terrorist attacks, most people were not yet convinced about the capacity of AQIM on Mauritanian territory. There were numerous rumours circulating that hinted at the regimes’ interest in deliberately overestimating the terror threat in order to gain access to international assistance funds.³⁰ This changed after the summer of 2009, when a suicide attack was carried out in front of the French embassy in Nouakchott.

23 France 24 English 2018.

24 Jourde 2011, 2.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 4

27 Ibid., 5.

28 For the “red zones”, see Fig. 1.

29 Vium 2013, 110.

30 Such doubts were not only mentioned in personal conversations, but also in international media (i.e. Copnall 2008), by think tanks (i.e. International Crisis Group 2005), and academics (i.e. Jourde 2005 and 2007). The doubts in the reality of the terror threats are not only prevalent in the Mauritanian context. Even in Algeria, where all signs began to point to the opening of a second front in the war of terror, such rumours about the involvement of US and government secret services in the production of local terrorism can be found, see i.e. Keenan 2007, 131.

Between 2006 and 2014, I had regularly completed short fieldwork visits of three to eight weeks in the country. In the beginning, an alternative story to the official terrorist attack was created for any violent incident, dismantling it as a mere criminal act without jihadist involvement. However, after the suicide attack at the French embassy in August 2009, the critical voices denying the problem of AQIM on the territory of Mauritania became increasingly silent. After 2010, I was all of a sudden asked by friends to wear a *malahfa* (Arabic: a long fabric wrap, to cover head and body) when visiting certain quarters in Nouakchott. They were afraid that I could be in danger if I was easily identifiable as a foreigner by jihadists. Another time, when I spent a weekend in the desert of Adrar (northwest Mauritania) with a Mauritanian friend, we stopped close to a village to cook some tea under a tree. After a while, people approached us with great caution and were relieved when we started chatting with them. Soon they admitted that they were scared when they saw a stranger with a European woman thinking that this might be a terrorist holding a hostage. The feeling of insecurity in Nouakchott became additionally fuelled by cases of robbery, drug trafficking, and rape, leading to fundamental changes in socialising habits. While until 2009 it was common in Nouakchott to have the door of the house open and to find strangers sitting in your salon, drinking a cup of tea and chatting, this has since stopped. People started locking their houses even when they were at home and the custom of serving tea in your salon to strangers who just dropped by to say hello has disappeared.

The *maḥḍara* and its propagation of a Mauritanian Islam

As vague as the threats of terror are, the definition of what describes Mauritanian Islamic heritage is not clearly definable, but is constantly negotiated among various groups within Mauritanian society. I argue that the perception of insecurity, the fear of terror that originates from within the society and the continuous sentiments of exclusion and marginalisation among certain social status groups fuels public debate about the nature and the position of the Mauritanian Islamic heritage within national identity. Even though Mauritania is called “Islamic Republic of Mauritania”, the legal framework of the country is a bricolage of Islamic and French law, and does not exclusively conform to sharia law. Nevertheless, the Mauritanian *‘ulamā’* have an important influence on government decisions. In other, formerly colonised, Muslim countries, traditional

Islamic education as represented by the *maḥḍara* have been marginalised by post-independent governments. This is different in Mauritania. With the foundation of the ISERI (Institut Scientifique des Etudes et Recherche Islamique), funded by Saudi Arabia in 1978, students from *maḥḍara*-s were enabled to conduct higher education without ever having entered state-affiliated schools before. These students later become teachers in state schools, work in the field of jurisprudence, state administration, state media, or in the now growing field of administrative posts in various ministries and agencies dealing with 'Islamic affairs'. The influence of the *maḥḍara* on the fabric of Islamic heritage is as strong as it is in government institutions in general.

The dynamic of the fabric of Mauritanian Islamic heritage becomes formative for the reality of social order. It not only supports the trend towards 'Arabisation' which leads to conflicts with sub-Saharan non-Arabophone communities, but also fosters the Islamic framing of political arguments and social grievances as a common form of expression, especially among members of the Ḥassāniyya-speaking communities in Mauritania.³¹ It is especially among this ethno-linguistic setting that Islamic heritage is hotly debated and numerous etiquettes restrict critical statements, especially when touching on issues that fight social inequality due to matters of kinship (i.e. tribalism, social status group), gender segregation, and jihadism. The *maḥḍara*, as an important religious institution, has been promoted as contributing to national unity, the fight against illiteracy and thus poverty.³² However, during the era of war on terror, Islamic education has become increasingly scrutinised due to its alleged role in spreading doctrines that justify violent actions in the name of Islam. The Mauritanian government has been actively involved in setting up a (re)evaluation of the cultural heritage. Since the military came to power in 1979, the 'Arab' nature of the Mauritanian cultural heritage has been emphasised and its 'Islamic' nature amplified.³³ There were two bigger projects launched during the military rule reminding us that the domain of cultural heritage is, just like the global war on terror, projected within the framework of international funding programmes. The first project for the safeguarding of the old caravan towns in the desert (Chinguetti, Ouadane, Tishit, and Walata) was launched in 1979 with UNESCO, and in 1999 the second project for the safeguarding and valorisation of the Mauritanian cultural heritage was financed by the World Bank (PSVPM, Projet de

31 Ould Ahmed Salem 2013, 16.

32 Frede 2016.

33 Ould Cheikh 2017, 282–83.

Sauvegarde et de Valorisation du Patrimoine Culturel Mauritanien, 1999–2003).³⁴

Both projects encompassed a mixture of policies, diversifying the country's economy through cultural tourism and defining what the Mauritanian heritage is about, how much weight to lay on its Islamic and Arabic aspects, and what kind of values it represents. The *maḥḍara* is of course not missing from this debate. When the PSVPM was launched, it was represented as an institution that promotes freedom (*liberté*), democracy, and equality (*démocratie et égalité*), while being free of charge (*gratuité*).³⁵ Moreover, the methodology of memorisation as the main pedagogical emphasis was classified as the authentic way of Islamic learning, in contrast to the Graeco-Roman methodologies that were later adopted in most parts of the Muslim world.³⁶ Finally, the *maḥḍara*, while found throughout Mauritania among all social and ethnic contexts, is an important institution for building unity among the various ethno-linguistic communities.³⁷ The presentation ended with a security argument, reminding us that the later 1990s were already a prelude to the 'war on terror':

This is how the *maḥḍara* will radiate by reconciling authenticity and modernity, making the *maḥḍara* a tool for development, a means for the maintaining of populations and the preservation of their moral and spiritual values, characterized both by centrism and balance away from extremism and overstatement. It should be noted that the followers of the *maḥḍara* cannot, under any circumstances, become terrorists even if they need to become Mujahideen [combatants] that is to say that the teachings of the *maḥḍara* alone are sufficient to instil such spirit, not only in our dear country but beyond and throughout the north and west of Africa to contribute greatly to the advent of an enlightened, authentic and open spirit.³⁸

The international recognition of the *maḥḍara*: Perspective of knowledge seekers

The Mauritanian *maḥḍara* is obviously a projection surface for quite contradicting visions: from the driver for democracy and tolerance, and a propagator of 'moderate' Islam, as seen in the quotation from the PSVPM launching event in

³⁴ Ould Cheikh 2017, 284–90.

³⁵ Ould Boye 1999, 37.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 38.

³⁸ Ibid., 38. Translated from French.

1999, to the evaluation of the *maḥḍara* as a breeding ground for terrorism, by some experts of counter-terrorism in Arab media.³⁹ Based on the little substantial research done on the institution and its role in past and present Mauritania, everybody seems to project whatever they want into this institution. Nevertheless, one has to admit that the *maḥḍara* as an institution does encompass very diverse projects. The curriculum of education is not strictly regulated and varies from institution to institution, the financial support is organised by the scholars running the institutions, and state control remains superficial.⁴⁰ Further, the *maḥḍara* is entangled in translocal networks and cannot be understood as a static institution immune to any transformation. On the contrary, the *maḥḍara*'s pedagogical methodology as well as its curriculum has developed through the intellectual exchange between scholars from the Mauritanian desert with scholars in North Africa and the Middle East. Such exchanges have not been a one-way project that transferred knowledge from 'centres' of learning in North Africa and the Middle East to the Sahara, but took place and still takes place in all networked directions. As much as texts, pedagogies, doctrines, and ideas had been imported, Mauritanian '*ulamā*' have contributed substantially to the development of Islamic education at least since the 19th century, e.g. at al-Azhar in Egypt or at educational institutions in Saudi Arabia.⁴¹ Mauritanian '*ulamā*' have been and still are prominent among Sufi movements like the Qādiriyya, the Tijāniyya, within the Arab Naḥḍa, or the development of Salafi doctrine. We find them too among jihadist groups, most infamously, the religious scholar Abu Hafs al-Mauritani, who acted as the religious adviser for Osama bin Laden for a while. Still, as much as Mauritanian '*ulamā*' have actively imported global trends in Islamic doctrine and conversely contributed to its development, they have even attracted international students. During the 19th century, these students mainly came from the Sahel region. Since the later 20th century, students increasingly came from various parts of the world: North Africa, the Gulf States, North America, and Europe. Especially in contemporary Mauritanian *maḥḍara*-s, run by '*ulamā*' of various doctrinal orientation, students join from all corners of the world, and only a small percentage of these students later join jihadist movements in Libya, Sudan, Algeria, or other regions.⁴²

³⁹ Bensaid and Ladjal 2019, 157–58.

⁴⁰ Frede 2021, 362.

⁴¹ For al-Azhar, see Bensaid and Ladjal 2019, 152–53; for Saudi Arabia have a look at Ahmed 2015, Farquhar and Thurston 2018.

⁴² Wehrey 2019, 3.

I would like to contest the evaluation of the *maḥḍara* as a breeding ground for terrorism per se, even though biographies indicate that studying in a *maḥḍara* was part of most life paths of the inmates jailed for terrorism.⁴³ Moreover, there is a kind of study tourism going on in the Islamic world in general, attracting students who are searching for Islamic knowledge. Places like Mauritania, that has preserved traditional educational institutions of Islamic learning like the *maḥḍara*, appear to be especially attractive to these contemporary knowledge seekers. A few among them are vulnerable and at risk of being recruited by jihadist movements, others are simply looking for alternatives to take their lives in a new direction. The promise of detachment from Western influences and instead deep immersion in the study of Islamic knowledge and piety in a way that is perceived as authentic is remarkably attractive to contemporary knowledge seekers if they choose to go on the *riḥla* (journey). Some Mauritanian *maḥḍara*-s have become very prominent in a global trend of knowledge-seeking Muslims. Former students propagate the experience of their *riḥla* to Mauritania via Youtube, and other channels. Listening to one of these reports, like the one by the American convert Abdul Haqq, discussed in the following, reveals that the Mauritanian *maḥḍara*-s are well-connected within the Muslim world and attract all sorts of people.

Abdul Haqq runs the Youtube channel *Manhaj al-Tulaab* and regularly reports on his study experiences in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and finally in Mauritania in 2018. In Mauritania, he studied in a small village, named Noubaghiya, in one of the most prestigious contemporary *maḥḍara*-s run by a Tijānī scholar. On funding websites like Patreon⁴⁴ and GoFundMe⁴⁵, Abdul Haqq solicits funding for his journey and presents himself and his aims to become a scholar to teach American Muslims the ‘right Islam’ and to fight against ‘extremism’. He also broadcasts his ideas from his ‘knowledge journeys’ via Facebook and Twitter and gives private lessons via WhatsApp and Telegram. He is an archetypical contemporary seeker of Islamic knowledge. He describes the nature of Muslim plurality within the Mauritanian *maḥḍara* institutions as following:

[T]o say that you can’t go to study in Mauritania for this reason or that is complete *bāṭil* [Arab., false]. *Al-Muhimm* [Arab., the important point is], when you go to Mauritania you will meet every type of individual and ideology, because the *maḥḍara* accepts everyone, except they don’t accept people who cause issues. When you come into a *maḥḍara* they

⁴³ Ould Ahmed Salem 2013, 161.

⁴⁴ See Patreon profile “Abdul Haqq”: <https://www.patreon.com/Abdulhaqq>.

⁴⁵ See Abdul Haqq’s funding campaign “Abdul Haqq, Student of Knowledge”, <https://www.gofundme.com/abdulhaqq>.

accept you so you will meet [people following ideas] from this ideology and that ideology and it is the common rule in the *maḥḍara* that the people don't enter into matters of *khilāf* [Arab., dispute]. So, for example, we mentioned before that the *maḥḍara* is known to master '*ulūm al-'ālā* [Arab., advanced sciences, here methodology], the tools and order to understand the Qur'ān and Sunna. So, when they teach, everybody comes there and studies that same thing. Conversations begin and end with Arabic Grammar. So, you might not know what this one's '*aqida* [Arab., creed] is or that one's '*aqida* except if you talk with him about it privately.⁴⁶

The religious training conducted while studying at a *maḥḍara* attracts Muslim students of any doctrinal orientation, whether the teaching scholar is Sufi or not. The common agreement not to cause problems is an important aspect of the behaviour taught along with the content at these institutions. Such behaviour at least allows for the co-existence of multiple worldviews and interpretations of Islam, among these there may be some followers of jihadist doctrines as well as Sufis or Salafis.

Doubting in Mauritania's Islamic heritage: Could it breed terrorism?

Generally speaking, going to study religious knowledge (of any kind and level) is perceived as something good and beneficial in Mauritanian society. Therefore, if young members of the family state that they are going to study in a *maḥḍara* in the desert, the elders will be proud, but not worried. In the film "The Disappeared Friend" ("Mon ami disparu" by Zine el Abidine Ould Mohamed), screened at Nouakchott's film festival in 2009, the purely pious intention of studying in a *maḥḍara* was openly questioned for the first time. The plot of the film tackles the phenomenon of home-grown terrorism. The film provoked public anger in the aftermath of the premiere. Especially religious elites accused the film makers of having defamed the *maḥḍara* in a scandalous way.⁴⁷ The film is an Arabic-French fictional short film, that is made in a documentary style, tells the story of a young student who has gone abroad to study and, after some time returns and sets out to find his friend from his neighbourhood because he had lost his traces. Asking other friends and the mother of his friend what happened, the story develops as follows. The friend became interested in

⁴⁶ Lipham 2019.

⁴⁷ Ould Ahmed Salem 2013, 144.

religious studies. After a while, he approached his friends with some books about Wahhabi doctrine and tried to convince them to join the group he is going to. From one day to the next, he left his friends and family and told them that he was going to study in a *maḥḍara* out in the desert. He comes back once briefly for a visit but seems to have changed his personality completely. Shortly after his return, he leaves again for his ‘study’ and disappears without traces. The film ends with the suicide attack on the French embassy in Nouakchott implicating that the young man of the film had been the one who conducted the attack.⁴⁸

The main message of the film is that the international phenomenon of jihadism spared no-one. It is not only the violence conducted by strangers that had arrived in the capital – no – it is the home-grown youth that never travelled abroad that was recruited by a global terrorist organisation. What the plot of the film debunks is that at this point Mauritania faced the same problems as Muslim communities did elsewhere: young people from ordinary families and neighbourhoods were being recruited by jihadist organisations. Families and friends were left behind in a state of shock and grief, asking themselves what they could have done differently to avoid their son, daughter, or friend to disappear. The film had marked a turning point in the public perception of the threats of terror in Mauritania and what had been largely perceived as a foreign problem brought into the midst of society. The anger that arose as a first reaction after the screening was settled shortly afterwards by the intellectual head of Mauritania’s Muslim Brothers, Mohamed Hassan Ould Dedew (b. 1963), who discussed with the filmmakers, mediated between the ‘*ulamā*’ and artists, and finally judged the film as “important and useful.”⁴⁹

In the very same year of the suicide attack in front of the French embassy, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs started conducting a general survey (2009–10) for registering and counting institutes of Islamic education all over the country. The survey indicated the date of their establishment and the number of students enrolled in the institution. The number of foreign students were counted and the GPS data of the institution’s location was noted. The timing of the survey is interesting, as it reveals that Mauritania’s engagement within counter terrorism did not spare the *maḥḍara*-s. A first step undertaken by the government to steer Islamic education in new directions was the opening of a second Islamic university on the eastern edge of the county: the Islamic University of Aïoun, inaugu-

⁴⁸ Mohamed 2013.

⁴⁹ Ould Ahmed Salem 2013, 144.

rated in January 2012.⁵⁰ Interestingly, it is exactly this Islamic university where a centre for Islamic extremism studies was inaugurated in the autumn of 2019, illustrating the ruling regime's emphasis on security issues.⁵¹ The establishment of a new Islamic university in 2012 went hand in hand with the threat to close down ISERI in Nouakchott, which led to an immediate halt in enrolment of first-year students.⁵² This attempt to restructure Islamic education by closing down ISERI in favour of a newly set up university far from the capital provoked numerous protests for a couple of weeks, some of which turned into violent clashes with police forces. Finally, at the end of February 2012, the ministry for Islamic orientation declared that a complete closure of ISERI had never been envisaged and that they did not want to call into question ISERI's outstanding position as a centre for Islamic studies in the country.⁵³

Towards the end of 2015, a first direct involvement in regulating *maḥḍara*-s by the government was undertaken. Around forty *maḥḍara*-s were closed in the eastern part of the country. The reason given was that they lacked operating permits from the respective ministry. Again, the governmental intervention provoked angry reactions in the Mauritanian media. The teaching of Islamic knowledge is considered a duty for pious Muslims and was widely viewed as not requiring a licence from the government.⁵⁴ The closing of *maḥḍara*-s by the government was perceived as "crossing a red line", as Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Ematt from the RFD (Rassemblement des Forces Démocratiques) said.⁵⁵ However, the most intense response came from the Muslim Brotherhood in the country: Mohamed Jemil Mansour (b. 1967), still the leader of the Tawassoul Party (RNRD, Rassemblement national pour la réforme et le développement, known as Tawassoul) in 2015, declared the undertaking as an attack on the centrepiece of Mauritanian fame in the Muslim World, and that it equalled an attempt to erase Mauritania from the international Islamic intellectual history.⁵⁶ Ould Dedew called for protests against the government's attack on *maḥḍara*-s stating that:

It is impossible to make these Qur'ānic institutions disappear in a country like Mauritania (...). The Qur'ānic schools, which have been disseminated in the country since the fifth

⁵⁰ Alakhbar 2012b.

⁵¹ Ould Soueid Ahmed 2019.

⁵² Alakhbar 2012a.

⁵³ ANGOP 2012.

⁵⁴ Guèye 2016.

⁵⁵ Alakhbar 2016a.

⁵⁶ Alakhbar 2016b.

century AH, reflect the identity of Mauritania and no one can easily erase the identity of a people or a nation.⁵⁷

The protest did not help. However, interestingly, these *maḥḍara*-s had not been closed due to an accusation of spreading ‘extremism’. Two and a half years later, the first educational institutions were shut down because of terror threats. In September 2018, the Markaz Takwīn al-‘Ulamā’ in Nouakchott was closed on the grounds that it spreads ‘extremism’.⁵⁸ Established in 2009 by Ould Dedew, the Markaz was not a classical *maḥḍara*, but a traditionalist institution inspired by the *maḥḍara*. Financed privately by numerous conservative merchants, the Markaz financed the study of around 500 students by stipends. A significant number of students came from abroad. With forty-five teachers and a curriculum of eighteen years, the Markaz, organised like a boarding school, quickly rose to successful fame and was well-known throughout Islamist circles in the Muslim world. Via Facebook and Twitter, the Markaz promoted Ould Dedew and his institution effectively on a global scale. Yet, another educational institution of Ould Dedew was shut down: the Ibn Yacine University.⁵⁹

Questioning the *maḥḍara*’s curriculum: Social grievance and the quest for equality

The struggle about the question of regulating Islamic education tells us much about the drama of the threats of terror. By accusing Islamists openly of spreading ‘extremism’ while leaving the *maḥḍara*-s out of the ‘extremism’ debate, the ruling regime navigates the complex entanglements of Islamic education with processes of identity making. The centrality of the debate on Islamic heritage becomes even more evident when looking at the human rights movements within the country. One of the main problems are contradicting legal codes: the 1981 and 2007 secular law, which forbids slavery, and the constitution of 1992, which places Islamic law above secular law, allows slavery. Ould Abeid, the leader of the antislavery organisation IRA, therefore calls to attack the ‘*ulamā*’ who he accuses of spreading teachings of inequality as guardians of Islamic law.⁶⁰ Accusing the religious elite of teaching and spreading discrimination through

⁵⁷ Alakhbar 2015. Translated from French into English.

⁵⁸ RFI 2018.

⁵⁹ Ould Soueid Ahmed 2018, Kane 2018.

⁶⁰ Frontline Defenders 2012.

Islamic texts, the anti-slavery movement was the first to openly attack the curriculum of the *maḥḍara*. In this curriculum, Mālikī law texts constitute an important foundation. One of the most common texts taught is the *Mukhtaṣar al-Khalīl*, a comprehensive work on Mālikī law. On Friday, April 27, 2012, the IRA under the leadership of Biram Dah Ould Abeid, organised a public burning of pages of this text as a symbolic act in order to free Islam from the institution of slavery. This open attack of a revered Mālikī text taught throughout all *maḥḍara*-s of the country provoked public anger and hundreds took to the streets in the following days to demonstrate against such actions. The burning of Mālikī texts was condemned by the general public, including by all political parties.⁶¹ Just like the government's intervention into issues of Islamic education, as described above, the attack of the *maḥḍara*'s curriculum by human right activists crossed a 'red line' of acceptance by a majority of 'ulamā', politicians, and intellectuals.⁶²

However, despite the noisy protest, the anti-slavery activists have recruited a broad range of sympathisers from various social layers of the Mauritanian society as well, who took to the streets demanding the release of IRA activists imprisoned after burning religious texts allegedly threatening state security.⁶³ Among these sympathisers, who obviously did not feel offended by the critic on the *maḥḍara*'s curriculum, is Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mkhaitir (b. 1986). He grew up in Nouhadibou and originates from a family of blacksmiths, a social status group often marginalised and associated with Jewish lineages. He received religious and secular education and successfully studied economy at the University of Nouakchott. He worked in the mining sector after receiving his diploma. In December 2013, he published a text online called "Ad-din wa-t-tadaiyun wa-l-m'allimīn" (the religion, the religiousness and the blacksmith) signed with Muḥammad ash-Shaikh b. Muḥammad.⁶⁴ In this text, he invokes events from the Battles of Badr, Yathrib, and Banū Quraīḍa in the 7th century and describes how the Prophet Muḥammad treated converts, who had killed Muslims in these battles, differently. According to his interpretation, the different treatment had to do with the origin of the enemies. While the Prophet pardoned members of the Quraish, he could not have the same mercy with Abyssinians and Jews. He

⁶¹ BBC 2012.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ The text is available on Facebook, see Multaqā 21 Ağustos/Āb 2013. Further numerous web-sites spread copies, i.e. Ould Mkhaitir 2014. An English summary can be found here in Bullard 2014, 2–3.

then turns back to the entry statement where he had distinguished the human nature of religiosity from divine religion and reminded us that this difference is superficial, it is religion that acknowledge social difference. He then turns to the situation in Mauritania stating that Ḥarāṭīn, the small minority of Imraguen, and blacksmiths are suffering from discrimination due to the teachings of the local ‘*ulamā*’. In his opinion, this needs to be changed urgently.

The public reaction to Ould Mkhaitir’s text was furious. He was accused of blaming the Prophet himself and was eventually charged with apostasy. His wife was forcibly divorced, Ould Mkhaitir was sentenced to death in the first instance. A sentence that was later reduced to two years of jail in 2017. Nevertheless, he was only released in September 2019 after almost six years in prison and was soon sent into exile to France.⁶⁵ The lawyer who represented him was threatened with death.⁶⁶ Public intellectuals and their families who took a stand for him also had to fear death.⁶⁷ Moreover, rumours doubted the originality of Ould Mkhaitir’s text and suspected an Israeli mission behind it.⁶⁸ There were many public demonstrations and numerous ‘*ulamā*’ calling for the prompt execution of the accused. The violent reaction of the religious public was putting pressure on the ruling regime to carry out the sentence while international human right organisations actively campaigned for his immediate release. This sandwich position of the ruling regime illustrates that the Islamic heritage is not exclusively governed by the ruling elite in power, but is negotiated by various actors who envision a broad range of goals, from the demand for reform of Islam for social emancipation to the demand for a consistent implementation of the Mālikī sharia law.

Ould Mkhaitir’s text can also be read as an attack on the *maḥḍara*’s curriculum, as early Islamic history from the core curriculum is taught in lessons on the *sīra*, the prophet’s life path. Since arriving in France in autumn 2019, he has returned to social media platform, posting critical statements on Twitter and Facebook criticising the ruling regime’s harsh policies against feminists, homosexuals, and anti-slavery activists. But his criticism does not end there, as he also criticises the ‘*ulamā*’ who justify the marginalisation due to gender, sexuality, and ‘caste’, and the international community that silently tolerates the injustice to follow their own interests in the region. On January 22, 2020 he tweeted

⁶⁵ Ouest France 2019.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Amnesty International 2017.

⁶⁸ Freire 2017, 328.

about a conference in Mauritania attended by numerous African ‘*ulamā*’ to promote the ‘real moderate Islam’ to counter ‘extremism’⁶⁹:

The conference for peace, religious reform, and peaceful coexistence has been held in Mauritania. Nothing new. The conference has ended with the following results: – A death sentence for the one who leaves Islam and doubt in the validity of Islam; – A detention of five years in prison for the one who does not obey the Sunnite order in his private life. Like the usual habit, the international organisations and the European diplomats have participated and assisted financially and morally.⁷⁰

This statement sums up very well the social frictions that fuel the threats of terror in Mauritanian society. The disappointment among activists fighting for democratisation and social justice faced with a conservative religious trend that rejects emancipatory quests from human right activists combined with policies that criminalise their political engagement and international donors that support these policies. The case of Ould Mkhaitir illustrates that even other social status groups, like blacksmiths and griots among the Ḥassāniyya speakers, increasingly complain about societal disadvantages. They speak out loudly against the hegemony of Arab ideology and the conservative ‘*ulamā*’, who are accused of acknowledging social inequality with reference to religion.

Negotiating the *maḥḍara* in an era of terror threats

In contrast to other Sahelian countries, Mauritania has not been heavily affected by terror attacks during the last decade. However, the terror threats have unleashed their impact on the public negotiation of Mauritania’s Islamic heritage, especially on the local institution of traditional Islamic education, the *maḥḍara*. As Sounaye outlines in his chapter, Islam in the Sahel “has been a major source of inspiration for various socio-political agendas.”⁷¹ Policies of de-radicalisation link to these traditions of policy making within the framework of Islamic arguments. The Mauritanian government has developed into an important player within the Sahelian fight against terrorism. Moreover, in the Mauritanian case, Islam is also an important element in the creation of a na-

⁶⁹ APA 2020.

⁷⁰ Translated from French: @Cheick_Mkhaitir, January 22, 2020.

⁷¹ Sounaye in this book, 105.

tional identity that seeks to break away from the established ethno-linguistic hegemonies and social stratifications that form an obstacle to national unity. A discourse about ‘good’ Islam in Mauritania and foreign Islamic ‘extremism’ therefore helps to intervene in the landscape of (trans-)locally established religious elites. It defines citizenship along a government-approved concept of Islamic norms and values. In agreement with some conservative ‘*ulamā*’, the ruling regime has set up an argument against ‘extremism’ to maintain the status quo of elites, in politics, economics, and public debate.

Mauritania’s ‘*ulamā*’ have been drawn into the state’s administration through the integration of students of the *maḥḍara* into state institutions like schools and ministries, the creation of state-affiliated counselling, the regulation of organisations like the Islamic High Council (IHC, 1991–2017), which dissolved in 2017 into the High Council for Fatwa and Administrative Appeals (Haut Conseil de la Fatwa et des Recours Gracieux) created in 2012,⁷² and ‘*ulamā*’ led programmes for social reintegration of former jihadists. In the era of the terror threats, Islam is increasingly drawn into politics, not only by Islamists and jihadists, but also by actors who counter them. The public debate about the preservation of a Mauritanian Islamic heritage creates distrust among the social strata that feels marginalised and deprived from their human rights by the ruling regime, the Islamist opposition, and the state incorporated ‘*ulamā*’ alike. As a consequence, Islam is increasingly alienated in public discourse from its original essence: the spiritual relationship between the believer and the divine.

72 Tamburini 2019, 9–10.

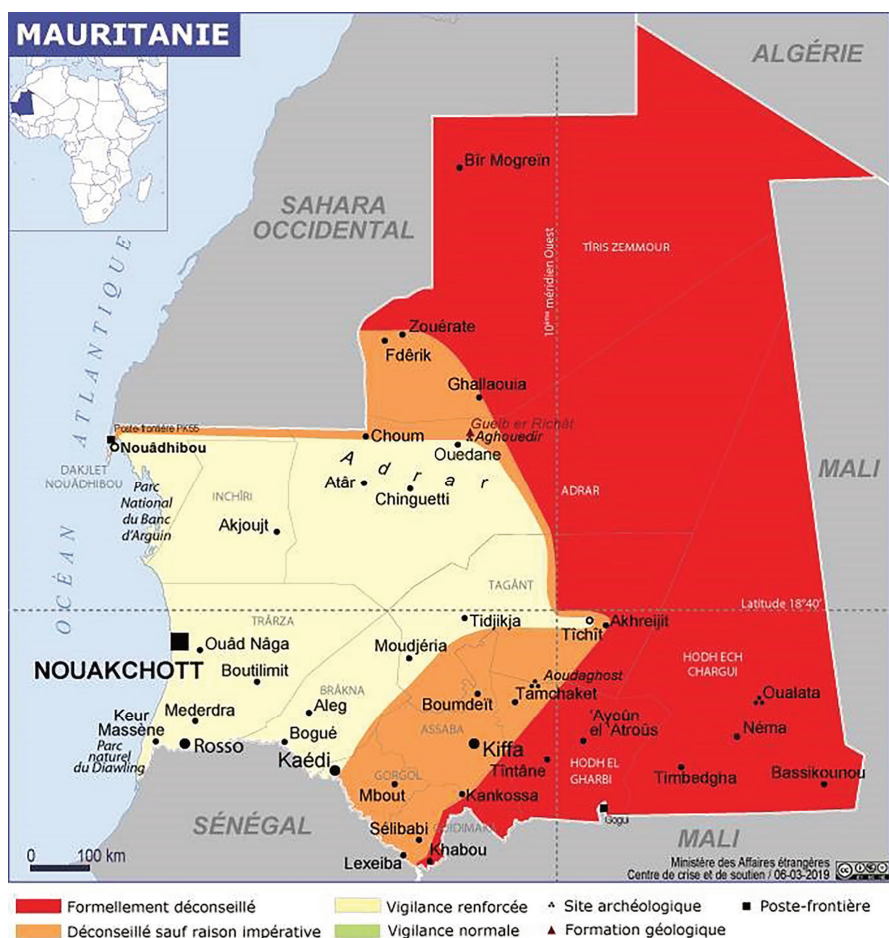


Fig. 1: French Government advice for travels to Mauritania. Source: France Diplomatie 2020.

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Judith Scheele

Islam as World Religion in Northern Mali

Abstract: In 2012, northern Mali seceded from the rest of the country under the leadership of secessionist and Islamist groups. This, and subsequent events, have been interpreted, broadly speaking, in two ways. First, as a result of the unchecked influence of external actors representing ‘global jihad’ on a country whose Islamic practice had until then been described as ‘moderate’. Second, allegiance to Islamist groups was seen as a strategy in local power struggles. Without wanting to invalidate the latter interpretation, this chapter asks what would happen if we took the Islamic rhetoric put forward by various actors in northern Mali seriously. This implies understanding Islam in the region both in local and in transregional terms, and placing it within a narrative not of radical rupture, but of continuity. Contemporary tensions between local conflicts and universal notions of justice, legitimacy and belonging, have in fact a long and variegated history in the area.

Introduction

When large parts of northern Mali seceded from the country under the leadership of Islamist groupings in early 2012, there was an immediate tendency in the European media to blame this on external influences that had, in the space of a decade or less, apparently led to the ‘radicalisation’ of the ‘traditionally moderate’ Islam practiced in the area.¹ As a widely-cited and generally well-informed analysis of events stated in 2013, the “open sore” of conflict-ridden and poorly governed northern Mali had become “infected by foreign Salafi ideas and muja-hideen, and by trans-national networks of organised crime”.² Others soon proposed an alternative reading. They suggested that the reference to ‘radical Islam’ was best understood as a cover for other political struggles, opposing dominant political groups and their former dependents, and whose primary stakes were control over trade routes and access to pastures. Or they were seen as attempts to compensate for youth disaffection, the shortcomings of the state,

1 For critical comments on the concept of ‘radicalisation’, see Marchal and Ould Ahmed Salem 2018.

2 Lecocq et al. 2013.

or indeed the effects of state corruption.³ While there can be no doubt about the much greater pertinence of these latter explanations, in both readings, ‘radical Islam’ risks being ultimately explained away.⁴ It appears either as foreign ‘corruption’ of local ‘moderate’ Islam, or as a smokescreen that can be overcome by the elimination of foreign fighters, military intervention, state building, and enhanced border control. In other words, experts might squabble over which level of analysis really matters – whether we are dealing with essentially local conflicts hiding behind an Islamic façade, or with another instance of the unchecked global march of religious fanaticism – but the basic terms of the debate are set, as is an implicit distinction between ‘radical’ and ‘moderate’ Islam.⁵

This chapter asks what would happen if we stepped back from this reading and took seriously the Islamic rhetoric put forward by various actors in northern Mali, situating it within a narrative not of radical rupture, but of continuity: within the tension between local conflicts and universal aspirations that have long shaped notions of justice, legitimacy, status, and belonging in the area, but that by definition can never be resolved. This is an undertaking beyond the scope of this chapter, or indeed the evidence at my disposal.⁶ Four tentative points emerge nonetheless: (i) Islamist activism in northern Mali situates itself neither on an exclusively local nor on a global scale, but derives its primary references, terms of debate, and recruits from a longstanding intellectual region that spans most (but by no means all) of the Western Sahara and its southern edge. (ii) This region provides Islamic movements in the area with their own historical and geographical framework that consciously predates contemporary nation-states, creating its own form of historicity and historical legitimacy. (iii) Within it, operative distinctions are not those of ‘local’ or ‘foreign’, but rather expressed in terms of status, kinship, and alliance. (iv) Lastly, religious

³ See Thurston and Lebovich 2013, Briscoe 2014, Raineri and Strazzari 2015, Benjaminsen and Ba 2019, Grémont 2019, Théroux-Benoni et al. 2016, Yahaya Ibrahim 2017, and Dowd and Raleigh 2013, respectively.

⁴ The tendency to explain religion through other factors has been built into the social sciences since Durkheim. Such explanations are important, but never quite sufficient (Schielke 2019).

⁵ As Prud’homme (2015, 131) notes, most academic analysts are wary of this distinction, which is clearly an *etic* (colonial), rather than an *emic* category. Given its current political force (Marzouki 2011), however, it is difficult not to play into it, willingly or not.

⁶ I carried out long-term ethnographic field research in northern Mali (mostly Gao and Timbuktu) in 2008 and 2009, but have not been back to the area since 2012, although I have spoken to people there on the telephone or met them elsewhere. This chapter is thus based on personal communications, written sources, and media and expert reports, in addition to my own background knowledge.

differences, including those with people from southern Mali, do not necessarily indicate incompatibility, but potentially stake out new grounds for debate, thereby creating shared terms of references whose impact might be much greater in the long run than that of militant jihad.⁷

The conflict

In January 2012, fighters from the Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) successfully attacked several army garrisons in northern Mali. They met with little resistance as they advanced, taking Gao on March 31 and Timbuktu on April 1. On April 6, they announced (from Paris) the creation of the independent state of Azawad in northern Mali. By then, rebel forces controlled two thirds of Malian territory, although much of this was desert and home to less than ten per cent of Mali's overall population. In the meantime, the national government in southern Mali had collapsed following a military coup.

'Tuareg' rebellions have been an integral part of the country's history since independence from France in 1960.⁸ But they had never been quite as successful. This was partly due to the MNLA's much greater firepower compared to earlier rebel movements, which in turn was connected to Qadhafi's demise in neighbouring Libya, host to a substantial number of Malian Tuareg labour migrants. It can be partly explained by reference to the quasi-absence of state institutions in the North, which has long been governed by proxies.⁹ The MNLA, moreover, was not fighting alone in northern Mali, but was first seconded and then rapidly displaced by groups fighting under an Islamic banner. These included al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM, a transformation of the Algeria-based GSPC), but also a number of more local groups, such as Ansar al-Din, and the Movement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO), who together seemed to be able to draw on a much more extensive pool of resources and recruits than the MNLA. After a short-lived alliance with the MNLA, these groups expelled MNLA officials from Timbuktu in April and from Gao in June 2012 and started to administer both towns and their hinterlands according to

⁷ As Li (2015, 12–7) notes, 'jihad' is a slippery term. However, the term and its derivatives are now widely used in Mali, including as a self-definition (Thérout-Benoni et al. 2016, 2), and I will follow this usage here.

⁸ See Boilley 2009 and Lecocq 2010.

⁹ Hüsken and Klute 2015.

shari'a. In November 2012, the MUJAO also captured Menaka, thereby putting all major towns in the North under Islamist control.

On January 10, 2013, Ansar al-Din launched an attack on Konna, a town in central Mali south of the boundaries of 'Azawad'. Following a demand for help by the then Malian president Dioncounda Traoré, the French army intervened on January 11. Officially, this was an emergency intervention to stop 'jihadi terrorists' from reaching southern Mali, although their intervention had clearly been prepared beforehand, waiting for an opportunity to deploy.¹⁰ By the end of the month, the French army, with the help of Chadian troops, controlled all major settlements in northern Mali. They were gradually, but never totally, replaced by MINUSMA, a United Nations 'peacekeeping' mission, from April 25, 2013 onwards.¹¹ At the time of final revisions (spring 2021), French troops were still on the ground in Mali, although resistance against their presence was mounting nationwide.¹² Although external military intervention was swift in removing Islamist control from towns, and in killing perhaps a third of the estimated 2,000 fighters in the area,¹³ its control never extended to the countryside. Islamist groups of various labels and affiliations have since proliferated, including further south. Today, they control most of the rural areas in central and northern Mali, where they have implemented their own forms of territorial and legal administration, centred on wells, quranic schools, and Islamic courts.¹⁴

For international analysts, these events came as a shock. Mali had long been presented as the "poster child for African democracy";¹⁵ a "donor darling";¹⁶ poor, but friendly; a priced destination for tourists; culturally sophisticated, present on the international music scene; and, although Muslim, "tolerant" and

10 Henke 2017, 13. For more information on how and why the French intervention came about, see Henke 2017, and Boeke and Schuurman 2015. For an analysis of French military interventions in its former West African colonies more generally, see Charbonneau 2017.

11 'Peacekeeping' is a clear misnomer, as there was (and still is) no peace to be kept. On the MINUSMA, see Cold-Ravnkilde, Albrecht and Haugegaard (2017), who note internal structural inequalities between Western and non-Western soldiers. Soldiers from African countries account for 67% of military personnel on the ground, and for 90% of casualties so far.

12 See, for instance, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbPaij78Owo>, accessed May 13, 2020. Also "Frappes sur Bounti (Mali): des associations demandent une enquête indépendante", RFI January 2, 2021; and "Mali: polémique autour d'une frappe de la force Barkhane vers Talataye", RFI March 26, 2021.

13 Boeke and Schuurman 2015, 1.

14 Klute, personal communication, Bayreuth, March 4, 2019. See also International Crisis Group 2016 and 2019, 5 and 13.

15 Benjaminsen and Ba 2019, 5.

16 Bergamaschi 2014.

“open-minded”; “a peaceful republic with a pleasant air of democracy and secularism”.¹⁷ As part and parcel of this image, ‘Malian Islam’ tended to be portrayed as inherently different from, and more ‘tolerant’ than, its Middle Eastern counterpart, in a rhetoric that echoed colonial distinctions between ‘moderate’ (‘Sufi’) and ‘radical’ (‘Wahhabi’), ‘local’ and ‘global’, ‘black’ and ‘white’ Islam.¹⁸ ‘The Tuareg’, meanwhile, have long been seen by French audiences in particular as inherently ‘un-Islamic’, and open to friendship with France.¹⁹ There is no need to reiterate here that corruption had in fact been rife in pre-conflict Mali; that government in the North had been “mafia-like”;²⁰ that Malian society was riven by generational, educational, regional, linguistic, and class tensions; that Islam in the country was as diverse and ‘orthodox’ as elsewhere; that Islamist groups from Algeria had long found a sanctuary in the north of the country, tolerated because Malian government officials collected a share of AQIM ransoms, much as they did with the profits of international smuggling in the area.²¹ That, in fact, Mali’s golden international image was part of the problem, as Mali’s dependency on foreign goodwill made it necessary to play up to whatever image ‘the West’ (or indeed, ‘the East’) wanted to see, instead of addressing political tensions in the country head-on.²²

Media portrayals

Mali’s golden image, including its alleged subscription to ‘moderate Islam’, however, was too deep-seated to be discarded quite so lightly. Initially, events in northern Mali were described primarily, in the media but also some expert reports, as sparked by external factors, by a heady cocktail of Algerian jihadis, Colombian drug-smugglers, and Libyan guns.²³ Some of this might have been

¹⁷ Holder 2013.

¹⁸ ‘White’ here refers to speakers of Tamacheq and Arabic. Triaud (2014) describes the colonial creation and the longevity of the notion of an ‘African’ or ‘black Islam’ that was perceived to be less ‘pure’ and therefore less threatening to European rule. Needless to say, this distinction is historically unfounded, as is the idea of a specifically ‘Malian’ or even ‘African Islam’ (Kane 2012).

¹⁹ Casajus 1995.

²⁰ Bergamasci 2014, 355.

²¹ Dowd and Raleigh 2013, 506.

²² Bergamasci 2014, 348.

²³ Briscoe 2014.

due to the impact of French military propaganda.²⁴ It is important to note here that the French military intervention in northern Mali resulted in a “war without images”,²⁵ or rather, one in which almost all information was produced or at least controlled by the French army. Subsequent analyses of the situation in northern Mali often read as if the French army itself were not themselves among the ‘foreign actors’ in the area, and the best-armed of them all.²⁶ Whatever its origins, the image of an essentially external threat was endorsed by official Malian rhetoric pleading for foreign military intervention, and also by local actors who positioned themselves as bulwarks against ‘global Islam’. Prominent among them was the late ‘supreme chief’ of the Touareg Kel Adagh in Kidal, Intallah ag Attaher, who, in 2013, asked “all armed movements from outside the Azawad” to leave;²⁷ one of Intallah’s sons, Alghabas, is currently administering Kidal based on *shari’a*. Beyond the control of major towns, foreign military intervention hence aimed primarily at the removal of foreign fighters and the closure of the border with Algeria and Niger, although these measures were rewarded with little success, beyond the increase of food prices for the local population.²⁸

The image of jihadis as inherently alien to Mali also pervades popular portrayals of the current conflict in northern Mali, especially in Europe. Take, for instance, the 2014 film *Timbuktu*, a Franco-Mauritanian co-production directed by the Mauritanian filmmaker Abderrahmane Sissako. *Timbuktu* was acclaimed in French media as the “greatest success in the history of African cinema”.²⁹ It obtained seven Césars in 2015, including that of best film and best director, and it was the only African film officially selected for the 2014 Cannes film festival. It was filmed in Mauritania with funds from the Mauritanian government, and under protection and with logistical help from the Mauritanian and French armies.³⁰ The film tells the story of a Tuareg couple and their daughter whose lives are torn apart as the husband, Kidane, accidentally kills a local fisherman. The fisherman’s mother refuses to grant pardon, even though she is offered compensation. Kidane is condemned to death and executed by an Islamic legal

²⁴ Henke 2017, 10.

²⁵ Boeke 2016.

²⁶ Grémont 2019, 49.

²⁷ Lecocq et al. 2013, 11.

²⁸ Bensassi et al. 2015, 19; see also “Entretien avec Alghabas ag Intalla, chef du Mouvement Islamique de l’Azawad (MIA)”, *Malijet avec Andy Morgan Writes*, February 1, 2013.

²⁹ According to Radio France Internationale (RFI), February 3, 2016.

³⁰ On Mauritania’s ambivalent stance towards ‘global Islamic terror’, see Ould Ahmed Salem 2013.

court. This story is based on the real execution of Moussa ag Mohamed, a Tuareg member of Ansar al-Din, judged and executed by his own friends and colleagues in November 2012.³¹ In the film, however, Kidane is a Tuareg herd owner and occasional musician unknown to, and inherently different from, the Islamists he confronts. The latter are mostly portrayed as foreign – the lead actor is Tunisian – and relying on interpreters to communicate with the local population. Or, they are ‘up-rooted’ locals who returned from exile in Libya and work in subordinate positions. No further mention is made of the refusal of the fisherman’s family to forgive the murder and the way it probably contributed to the long-standing racial and ethnic tensions in the area.

This storyline is interspersed with re-enacted scenes from the Mauritanian journalist Lemine ould Mohamed Salem’s (2016) documentary *Salafistes*, which condenses nine months of events across northern Mali into a few days in Timbuktu, and from news coverage.³² In the film’s opening sequence, for instance, wooden statues looking generically ‘African’ are shot at by invisible mujahidin and ultimately destroyed. This seems to draw on “exclusive footage” broadcast by the French news programme *Journal de 20 heures* in June 2012, where local Tamacheq-speaking mujahidin are seen breaking small and rather badly made wooden statues and haranguing the local population.³³ The status of these statues is unclear – “they probably took them from a tourist shop”³⁴ – but the news commentary describes them as “traditional African divinities, broken one by one, just like the Taliban did with the famous Buddhas of Bamiyan, blown up with dynamite”.³⁵ (Timbuktu has been a centre of Islamic scholarship with an almost entirely Muslim population for centuries).

While there can be no common ground between *20 heures*’ statues and the Bamiyan Buddhas outside of Western perceptions of a universal threat, the parallel is significant. It feeds into the same underlying rhetoric about ‘global jihad’ that has been put forward since 2001 to justify the ‘global war on terror’ (GWOT). Namely, to blame it on a few inherently external agitators whose ‘surgical’ removal would return things back to normal. In Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, as it used to be in Chechnya and Bosnia Hercegovina, ‘foreign fighters’

31 Lemine ould Mohamed Salem, “Dans le nord Mali, la charia s’applique aussi aux soldats de Dieu”, *Libération*, November 25, 2012.

32 Joan Tilouine, “‘Salafistes’: le documentaire qui a inspiré ‘Timbuktu’”, *Le Monde*, December 10, 2015.

33 Available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfheY-IGffQ>, accessed March 11, 2019.

34 André Bourgeot, commentary on *Timbuktu*, available from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNJQxU7__7A, accessed March 11, 2019.

35 “Tombouctou, le carrefour des Salafistes d’Aqmi de par le monde”, *20 heures*, June 9, 2012.

tend to be represented as the most dangerous and ‘fanatical’ of all mujahidin in Western media. They are described as footloose and rootless, and hence without scruple and limitations; men without family nor women to bind them. They are, in Li’s pithy phrase, “Muslims out of place”, and in most cases in fact ‘Arabs out of place’; they ought to be removed at all cost, and much of the worldwide military and punitive apparatus of the GWOT targets them as a priority.³⁶ A story of ‘Arabs out of place’ in northern Mali is thus one that greatly resonates with Western and perhaps also some Malian audiences. It is, however, doubly pernicious as northern Mali is home to a small, but important, minority of Arabs, who, although Malian, are understood by many southerners to be inherently ‘foreign’, or at least, of questionable allegiance and loyalty to the Malian nation.³⁷ Defining northern Malian Islamists as primarily Arab, and Arabs as foreign, feeds into a potentially explosive history of already fraught community relations.

Islam as a façade for local conflicts

Explanations emphasising the ‘foreignness’ of jihadis also stumble over empirical evidence showing that the majority of fighters were recruited locally and that local jihadi organisations occupied centre stage in the conflict. The more visible of these are Ansar al-Din, founded by Tuareg from Kidal but which also attracted a following among Arabs from Timbuktu, and MUJAO, said to be set up as a reaction against ‘foreign’ dominance of AQIM. It seems that the more spectacular jihadi activities dwelled on by foreign media, such as the destruction of saints’ tombs, public flogging, amputations, and the prohibition of games, were carried out by local organisations and fighters, while the AQIM leadership attempted to calm their overzealousness in favour of a “progressive application” of *shari’a*. AQIM in fact repeatedly cautioned their fighters against the “fanaticism” (*ta’assub*, which is perhaps better translated as ‘factionalism’) of their Tuareg allies “which is only useful when it is well directed and ruled by law”, admonishing them to be as inclusive as possible in their recruitment and counsel.³⁸ As a result, more thoughtful analyses conclude that the conflict in

³⁶ Li 2009, 359. Over two-thirds of the detainees at Guantanamo were foreign fighters (367).

³⁷ Scheele 2013, 176.

³⁸ AQMI, l’Emirat de l’Organisation, “Directives générales relatives au projet islamique djihadiste de l’Azawad”, July 20, 2012 (published by RFI, October 6, 2013). <https://www.rfi.fr/>

northern Mali was and is primarily local.³⁹ Such analyses stress several elements: the long history of rebellion in northern Mali, the accumulated grievance this has led to, and the Malian government's repeated failure to address these; conflicts between groups considered to be a different status, ranging from 'noble' via 'client' to 'former slave'; competition over resources, both in the form of transnational smuggling and of pastoral and agricultural productive regimes; and local needs for protection, in an increasingly violent social and political environment.

Northern Mali has its own long and complex history of rebellion and bloody suppression by the Malian army. This in turn has created hostilities and a deep-seated mistrust against the regime in Bamako and populations associated with it, as probably all 'white' inhabitants of the area – that is to say, Arabic- and Tamacheq-speakers of a higher status – have personal memories of brutal exactions committed by Malian soldiers, and lost close relatives in the struggle.⁴⁰ It has also shaped the lives of many who are now prominent in armed conflict, such as, most famously, Iyad ag Ghali, the founder of Ansar al-Din and current leader of the JNIM, Mali's currently most influential Islamist movement, who had been an influential figure in earlier 'secular' rebellions. The rebellion of the 1990s and its aftermath was marked by scissions between different Tuareg groups, protesting against the dominant role played by 'noble' families in the 1990s rebellion and its aftermath.⁴¹ This was also the time when formerly subordinate groups started bearing arms.⁴² Similar explanations are now being put forward for the current conflict. Ansar al-Din is seen by some as an attempt, by former 'nobles', to re-ascertain their political leadership in the area. The creation of MUJAO tends to be interpreted as a reaction of 'southern Saharans' and former clients against the arrogance of the Algerian leadership of AQIM.⁴³ In central Mali, the *katiba* Macina initially challenged the exclusive control of pasture by high-status local elites.⁴⁴ More generally, cleavages often seem to follow divisions between status groups, although alliances remain unpredictable.

fr/afrique/20131006-mali-vade-mecum-droukdel-mali-aqmi-terrorisme-al-qaida-sanguinaire, accessed January 7, 2021.

³⁹ For instance, Yahaya Ibrahim 2017, 8.

⁴⁰ Locally, Europeans tend to be described as 'Christian' (*nasara*) rather than 'white'. On the use of colour terms (of which 'black' and 'white' are only two) to distinguish between groups of people in the region, see Hall 2011.

⁴¹ Klute 2011.

⁴² Grémont 2019, 53.

⁴³ Raineri and Strazzari 2015, 259, Boeke and Schuurman 2015, 15.

⁴⁴ Jourde, Brossier and Cissé 2019.

Here as elsewhere, equality before God provides a persuasive argument for former lower-status people wishing to better their social position. Nonetheless, these explanations are only partly correct, as, true to the many cross-cutting ties that have long shaped the history of this region,⁴⁵ leading regional figures tend to move from one group to another, to the point where “local people in northern Mali are themselves unable to determine which group is which”.⁴⁶ Islamists, meanwhile, put forward a message of inclusivity: “Our battle is in the name of Islam, it’s not Arab or Tuareg, black or white, it’s in the name of Islam”.⁴⁷ This might be propaganda, but it is also, realistically, the only path to long-term military and political success in the area. The AQIM leadership at least are clearly aware of this – indeed, as seen above, excessive ‘tribalism’, or *ta’assub*, is one of their recurrent bugbears. Meanwhile, factional readings of events tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies, as the Malian government pursues its long-standing strategy of arming some groups against others, or of creating ‘local militias’ that, statistically speaking, have by now killed more people than any other actor in the Malian conflict, including the Malian and French armies.⁴⁸ Again, this strategy has a long and brutal history in the area.

Another related set of analyses, which have gained increased traction in the past few years as jihadis have successfully spread into central Mali, draw on political economy. After interviews with sixty-three “previously involved” young men in central and southern Mali, Thérout-Benoni et al. conclude that

in most cases documented by this study, youth engagement did not hinge on religious factors and was not the result of religious indoctrination. Religion seems to play a marginal position in the motivations of the youths interviewed in this study.⁴⁹

Rather, what mattered most to people was a desire to protect themselves and their livelihoods, especially in the area around Mopti, where membership in a jihadi group was seen as effective protection against cattle rustling.

In a similar vein, Poupart explains the constitution of the MUJAO in Gao as an attempt by locals to protect themselves against MNLA exactions: all political groups in the area “act like entrepreneurs and propose different types of rhetoric

⁴⁵ Grémont et al. 2004.

⁴⁶ Abu Ibnein, “Oumar Ould Hamaha: a case study of the bridges between three groups”, GCTAT, 11/01/2013. <http://www.gctat.org/fr/analysis/29-ranoc/220-oumar-ould-hamaha-a-case-study-of-the-bridges-between-three-groups.html>, accessed January 7, 2021.

⁴⁷ Oumar ould Hamaha, Timbuktu, April 6, 2012, recorded by AFP.

⁴⁸ Boisvert 2015, International Crisis Group 2016, 2019, Human Rights Watch 2020.

⁴⁹ Thérout-Bénoni et al. 2016, 4.

that mobilise to different degrees and according to their own strategies, identity, and political and religious aspirations”.⁵⁰ Grémont traces the history of conflicts and alliances open to local groups in north-eastern Mali and concludes that those who opt for Islamist allegiances “certainly do not primarily aim to carry out universal jihad”, but rather draw on them “as a resource in struggles for local power”, much as others might draw on privileged links with the French army.⁵¹ For Benjaminsen and Ba, who also work on central Mali, “alliances and conflicts are structured by material interests with deep historical roots in controlling land and resources, rather than by a radical Islamist agenda”.⁵² Local Fulani join Islamist groups because they provide reliable, quick, and relatively cheap solutions to struggles over land-rights, because they fight against extortion by noble groups traditionally backed by the state, and because they protect members against attacks by sedentary Dogon self-defence groups trained by the Malian army.

Arabs out of place?

My aim here is not to show that this point of view and the analyses that it informs are substantially wrong (they are not), but rather that because of the need to counterbalance media reports on ‘foreign contamination’ they may be wilfully blind to regional connections and universal ideas that also matter. As Grémont himself notes, as soon as the parties to local conflicts refer to their opponents as ‘mujahidin’ or ‘collaborators with the French’, simply speaking of inter-community conflicts “is perhaps not wrong, but certainly reductive”.⁵³ Indeed, attempts to avoid the narrative of ‘global jihad’ at all cost might implicitly strengthen it, by endorsing the conceptual division between ‘local’ and ‘global’ factors, while weighing them differently. In northern Mali (as elsewhere), local conflicts are rarely experienced as just local. To say that they might be phrased in, or rather experienced through, universal religious terms, and sincerely so, does not invalidate their local impact, on the contrary: both levels mutually reinforce each other, and give each other additional meaning. Quranic notions of injustice, tyranny, and the abuse of power strike chords with people who suffer from these daily, and gain clarity and traction from universal

⁵⁰ Poupart 2017, 105 and 102.

⁵¹ Grémont 2019, 58 and 60.

⁵² Benjaminsen and Ba 2019, 4. Jourde, Brossier and Cissé 2019 make a similar argument.

⁵³ Grémont 2019, 47.

language. Conversely, it is difficult to imagine what a ‘radical jihadi agenda’ that could *not* feed on local conflicts and specific resentments would in fact look like. It is thus this articulation of different levels, rather than the assumed preponderance of one over the other, that should catch our attention. This kind of ‘scaling’ has a long history in the region. Today, it is employed on all sides of the Malian conflict, although the universal values invoked vary.

On August 22, 2016, Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi, member of Ansar al-Din, was brought to trial before the ICC, accused of war crimes by the Malian government. He was indicted for leading the destruction of nine shrines and parts of the Sidi Yahya mosque in Timbuktu, one of which was a UNESCO-certified World Heritage site.⁵⁴ He was sentenced to nine years in prison and to pay € 2.7 million in compensation to his victims. According to the then director general of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, “[w]hen a World Heritage site is destroyed, because of stupidity and violence, the whole of humanity feels that it has been deprived of part of itself; that it has been injured.”⁵⁵

Islamic groups are thus not the only ones to invoke universal values to describe local events. And, for UNESCO also, the universal always necessarily takes place somewhere, and hence partakes in local socio-economic and political conflicts. By 2015, the shrines had been re-built with UNESCO funding, and “a ceremony was held... to reconsecrate [sic] the sites and hand back the keys to their traditional owners”.⁵⁶ Buildings that, from a UNESCO point of view, look like universal heritage were, in Timbuktu itself, closely associated with particular families, descendants of the saints; UNESCO therefore intervened – unwittingly but unavoidably – in power relations on the ground.

These families still exercise influence and claim superior status in the area, a claim that is resented by many. Thus, local Islamists reject the veneration of saints both in terms of a universal principle and in terms of a personal relationship of expected subordination to a particular family, and a hierarchical system associated with their high status. Most (but by no means all) jihadis or other kinds of Islamists recruited in Timbuktu are from groups that cannot claim privileged access to prestigious religious ancestry. This does not mean that we can reduce their motivation solely to local status struggles. Nevertheless, aspirations for universal value systems tend to appeal to people on the basis of their own experience. Similarly, Algerian Islamist who settled in the area from the

⁵⁴ <https://www.icc-cpi.int/Pages/item.aspx?name=pr1154&ln=en>, accessed March 26, 2021.

⁵⁵ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/987;%20consulted%20March%2026,%202021>, accessed March 26, 2021.

⁵⁶ Joy 2018.

1990s onwards tended to intermarry with families of lower status. Their in-laws thereby gained access to other forms of wealth, but also to a different kind of religious legitimacy — a different kind of universalism than that represented by the saints and their tombs and descendants. This can be read both as an attack on a social system based on genealogical status, and as an attempt to diversify it by introducing new sources of prestige. We are, then, not dealing with the opposition of local to global, but rather with the tensions between different claims to universality.

Timbuktu saints, moreover, tend to be internationally recognised Islamic scholars, and are therefore by definition never just local. A brief look at the names of the saints whose tombs have been destroyed gives us an indication of their heterogeneity, as well as of their ambivalent geographical status. They are: Sidi Mahmūd b. ‘Umar Aqīt (al-Walātī, from present-day Mauritania); Shaykh Muhammad Mahmūd al-Arawānī (just north of Timbuktu; the family claims Moroccan and ultimately sharifian origin); Shaykh Mukhtār b. Sidi Muhammad b. Shaykh al-Kabīr (al-Kuntī, from present-day southern Algeria); Alpha Moya; Sidi Mahmūd b. ‘Ammār (al-Walātī, from present-day Mauritania); Shaykh Muhammad al-Makkī (from the Hijāz); Shaykh ‘Abd al-Kasim al-Tuwātī (from present-day southern Algeria); Ahamad Fūlān; Bahaber Babadié; Sidi Yahya (al-Andalūsi). Their status as ‘saints’ owes much to their distant origins. It derived from their ability to reinvent the local through universal categories of value, and to inscribe the city into regional networks of scholarship, religious legitimacy, and mobility. Put together, their places of origin sketch out a region of religious connectivity that still has significance today, and indeed echoes contemporary jihadi talk, activity, and recruitment.

Ahmad al-Faqi, meanwhile, described himself as “a Tuareg born in a village near Timbuktu”⁵⁷ — one of the many lower-status ‘whites’ who, since the 1990s, felt excluded from the urban centre of Timbuktu.⁵⁸ Rather than a foreign jihadi attacking local saints, he is a local, or rather suburban, jihadi attacking ‘foreign’ saints in the name of the same universal religion that grants the latter their local precedence. Meanwhile, those saints and their contemporary descendants have found an unlikely backer in UNESCO, another universalist moral body, but one that comes with finance and court orders attached. In other words, Ahmad al-Faqi’s opposition to the local saintly families was probably simultaneously religiously, historically, socially, and politically motivated, and Bokova’s “whole of humanity” was only one of his targets. Similarly, when MUJAO destroyed a

⁵⁷ Joy 2018, 15.

⁵⁸ Scheele 2013, 175–76.

shrine 330 km north of Gao, it was a Kunta shrine.⁵⁹ This could be read as an act of religious purification, but also as the last instalment in the ‘Kunta war’, waged by formerly lower-status Arabs against their Kunta ‘lords’.⁶⁰ The overwhelming historical reference underlying many of these conflicts makes their religious scaling eminently plausible, but it would be wrong to privilege one level over another.

In-laws and out-laws

What, then, if we stepped away from oppositions between local and global, national and foreign, or even from formulations that try to dodge the question through neologisms, such as “glocal”?⁶¹ It is not merely the empirical inadequacy of this opposition that is at stake here, but also its conceptual limits. “The global” is all too often used “lazily as a catch-all appellation for things that are not readily understood in local or national terms”.⁶² The local raises just as many questions, especially when it comes to Islam, which, as a revealed religion, by definition implies some reference to the outside. This is true everywhere, but perhaps even more so in places like northern Mali, where people tend to be mobile, intermarry and trace relationships in other than national categories; where indeed mobility and a certain degree of externality tends to be at the root of local influence.⁶³ As a result, distinctions between ‘local’ and otherwise are gradual, contextual, and might change over a lifetime. Within the current conflict also, it is difficult to distinguish between local and global organisations. As noted above, people change allegiance, acronyms develop, and the exact interrelation between different groups remains obscure, perhaps even for those within them. Many, if not most, prominent fighters and politicians in the area have been members of at least three, and sometimes even four or five different groups that analysts might locate on different sides of the local and global (or indeed the ‘religious’ and ‘secular’) divide.⁶⁴ They also tend to speak several languages, and have a wide set of family connections to choose from.

⁵⁹ Raineri and Strazzari 2015, 261.

⁶⁰ On the Kunta war, see Scheele 2009, 86.

⁶¹ Marret 2008.

⁶² Li 2015, 17.

⁶³ Scheele 2012, chapter 4.

⁶⁴ Boeke 2016, 915.

The second problem with the categorical opposition between the local and the global is that it does not allow for intermediate levels of analysis. It is telling that Islamist references to regional projects are often transformed into a “global agenda” by analysts,⁶⁵ true to Li’s observation that there is a general “blindness” among analysts “to the possibility that others may pursue substantively different cosmopolitan or transnational projects”.⁶⁶ On closer examination, however, groups like AQIM, notwithstanding their claims to a ‘global jihad’, are neither local nor global in their activities, recruitment, and intellectual and historical references, but regional. The region they operate in pre-dates not only their existence, but also that of the nation-states they are fighting against. It is, in fact, similar to the one staked out by the *nisab* of the saints listed above, and replicated in generations of exchange, pilgrimage, travel, and intermarriage since their demise.

AQIM and other jihadi groups in the area have mostly fought and claimed attacks carried out within a territory ranging from Algeria to Mauritania via northern Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Their recruits, if they are ‘foreign’, similarly stem from that area, more precisely from Algeria, northern Mali and Mauritania, with the occasional Nigerian and Tunisian put in for good measure. This is not for lack of trying to attract people from elsewhere, but few international jihadis really want to go and fight in Mali when there are more attractive and prestigious options elsewhere. AQIM hence attempted to encourage more Tunisians to join them, but although Tunisians constituted the second largest contingent of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria, and the majority in Libya, few were willing to travel to Azawad.⁶⁷ Libyans and Moroccans similarly have never shown much interest in AQIM, which retained close links with its Algerian origins.⁶⁸ Moreover, their “Saharan brigade” does not seem to be recruited from the whole country, but rather from the northern edge of the deserts, a region that is historically closely connected to the deep south of Algeria and Azawad.⁶⁹ Abu Zeid, for instance, was born in the Illizi region, while Mokhtar Belmokhtar is a Sha’anba from near Ghadaïa, a group prominent among the regional trading elite since colonial times. When MUJAO fighters resented the influence of ‘northern Saharans’, these were perhaps the people they meant, and their re-

⁶⁵ See e.g. Guidère’s summary of an interview with the leader of AQIM, Abdemalik Droukdel, published in the *New York Times*, July 1, 2008, in Guidère 2008.

⁶⁶ Li 2009, 426.

⁶⁷ Boeke 2016, 924.

⁶⁸ Filiu 2009, 225.

⁶⁹ Scheele 2012, chapters 1 and 2.

sentiment was thus historically complex: they had long known the people they were dealing with, or at least their families, as regional traders, patrons, and in-laws.

If this seems anecdotal, it is striking that until 2012, the most common idiom used by Arabic-speakers in northern Mali when talking about ‘jihadis’ were those derived from kinship and alliances, rather than from categorical distinctions between local and foreign: “they came and got married to Arabs and Tuareg of no account out in the desert”. The local AQIM leadership followed suite, getting married to families of somewhat more account. Or, as Lecocq put it, the Saharan “foreign fighters” were “not so much foreign as they are simply choosing between nationalities, while sometimes holding multiple ones”.⁷⁰ This rhetoric is worth pursuing, not only because it replaces absolute categories (foreign and local) with relative ones (in-laws), and categorical oppositions with nuanced histories of alliance and rivalry, but also because it underlines the role of women who, as a result, act as indispensable mediators and conduits for external ideas and agents, and their moral evaluation, and vice versa.⁷¹

Different cosmopolitan projects

This region of jihadi involvement and recruitment is also reflected in its historical references. These need to be taken seriously as the expression of a particular way of making sense of the world, steeped in regional history and geography. This is apparent in the names chosen for local *katā’ib* (brigades, singular *katība*), which include (among others) AQIM’s *katība* Tāriq b. Ziyād, named after the Umayyad commander (of Berber or Arab origin) who led the conquest of Visigothic Hispania in the 8th century, and *katība* Yūsuf b. Tashfīn, third Almoravid *imām* and founder of Marrakesh in the 11th century; AQIM’s splinter group al-Murābitūn (the Almoravids, a reformist movement of Berber origin); and MUJAO’s *katība* Usman dan Fodio (a militant 18th-century Islamic reformer).⁷² In central Mali, the Front de Libération du Macina (FLM, or *katība* Macina) refers, in name but also in its internal jurisprudence, to the Dina (jihadi state) of Hamdallahi that governed the area in the 19th century; conflicts over pastures

⁷⁰ Lecocq 2013, 66.

⁷¹ Personal observations; Goundam and Timbuktu, 2007–08. Women are prominent in Islamic reform movements throughout the Sahel: see for instance Holder 2012 on southern Mali, and Sounaye 2011 on Niger.

⁷² A common reference also among Islamic reformers in Niger, see Sounaye 2012.

are regulated with reference to Dina precedent, adapted to suit many of their followers' more egalitarian ambitions.⁷³

In their internal correspondence, AQIM leaders describe the population of Azawad as eminently qualified for jihad, despite contemporary shortcomings,

because this people has distinguished itself by its commitment to the Islamic conquest under the Almoravids who have long preserved and defended the *umma*. It is one of the Islamic fighting people and will defend Islam and bear the responsibility for this region in the future.⁷⁴

This telescoping of history also influences AQIM's sociology, viewing the "people of Azawad" as divided into minor and major tribes and "social layers". This might strike us as anachronistic, but it is in the nature of political projects to impose their own historicity and thereby their own conceptual frameworks through which action is made meaningful. In northern Mali, this historical and sociological vision – and also the apparent anachronism or "self-conscious archaism" that underpins it⁷⁵ – might be off the mark at times, but is partly shared locally, and in fact results in a political programme that corresponds more closely to local political realities than Malian nation-state visions ever did. Tribes matter locally, as do genealogies and quranic history;⁷⁶ they do not fix people's relations in time, but provide a powerful grid of interpretation that cannot easily be rejected out of hand – names, categories, moral judgments and causal relations borrowed from it have much resonance.

The historical regions thus described by different groups and actors do not necessarily overlap. Reference to historic Sahelian jihads imply a different vision of space than reference to the Almoravids and al-Andalus (as AQIM's media outlet is called). But they are regions of a similar kind. They have no borders, but shared reference points, and establish a "new political geography (...) organized around sites of militancy and Muslim suffering"⁷⁷ and more visibly in this context, around sites of former glory and triumph. The absence of borders, and the associated free circulation of goods and people is indeed one of the positive aspects of jihadi rule that people emphasise locally. It is exactly the opposite to

⁷³ Benjaminsen and Ba 2019, 13, International Crisis Group 2019, 19.

⁷⁴ AQIM, l'Emirat de l'Organisation, "Directives générales relatives au projet islamique djihadiste de l'Azawad", July 29, 2012 (published by RFI, October 6, 2013). <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20131006-mali-vade-mecum-droukdel-mali-aqmi-terrorisme-al-qaida-sanguinaire>, accessed January 7, 2021.

⁷⁵ Creswell and Haykel 2015, 107.

⁷⁶ Scheele 2012, chapter 4; see also Popenoe 2004, 56.

⁷⁷ Creswell and Haykel 2015, 105.

international interventions whose main goal, as seen above, often seems to be to close borders and immobilise people. Both of these statements are ideological rather than empirical, as borders are never completely closed, and circulation is never free for all; but their ideological and symbolic impact matters. One of the first things MUJAO did was to abolish import and export tariffs, and while this might be a windfall for traders, it indirectly benefitted everybody in the region.

Jihadis, moreover, are not the only Islamic organisations to function in a regional transnational space that is broader than the nation-state (and might in fact exclude parts of it), without thereby being global. Holder describes the geographical reference relevant to the southern Malian reformist association Ançar Dine (not to be confused with the northern Ansar al-Din), which ends at Mopti – not coincidentally on the former border of Azawad – but extends across Mandé-speaking areas in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. Holder labels this “a West African *umma*”.⁷⁸ Such regional distinctions do not preclude dialogue, and their boundaries are fluid over time. As Li noted (with Afghanistan in mind), they might in fact generate pan-Islamism: everybody who defines themselves as a Muslim can choose to gather under the banner of Islam in certain circumstances, and the important question is not how uniformity remains necessarily elusive, but how differences are dealt with.⁷⁹ Even disputes can bring people together, as they might be grounded in shared assumptions and thereby reinforce them.

In the same way, the boundaries of ‘Azawad’ in no way indicate those of religious debate. Commentators have made much of the fact that Mahmoud Dicko, head of Mali’s *Haut conseil islamique du Mali* (HCIM) and himself a native of Timbuktu, initially welcomed the instauration of *sharīʿa* in northern Mali, before retracting his statement under international pressure.⁸⁰ It is difficult to see how he could be against *sharīʿa* (although he can of course be against its ‘abuse’, or against jihad, which he has since described as a “French creation”).⁸¹ Dicko himself is an Islamic reformer, one of many, and there has been a general shift in the Sahel towards a changed understanding of Islam, a “Salafi revolution” in Sounaye’s words, which has led not so much to (yet another) split between ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’ Islam, but to a change of generally accepted

⁷⁸ Holder 2012, 405.

⁷⁹ Li 2012, 19.

⁸⁰ On Dicko’s consummate negotiation skills with Western media, see Prud’homme 2015.

⁸¹ <https://mondafrique.com/le-chef-religieux-du-mali-denonce-le-djihadisme-comme-une-creation-francaise/>, accessed March 11, 2019.

Islamic rhetoric and standards.⁸² Or, in Alghabas ag Intallah's terms, "whoever speaks here now, in this territory, cannot say that they are against Islam".⁸³ This means that people might emphatically condemn the violent means employed by jihadis in northern Mali, without rejecting their underlying principles, many of which have in fact become common sense. This is why, in Bamako, the term 'terrorist' is more often applied to 'Tuareg separatists' than Islamists, and many feel that it would be easier to negotiate with Islamist groups – who are Muslim after all – than with, say, 'the Tuareg'.⁸⁴ Conversely, Dicko has been named recently by the leader of the *katiba* Macina in central Mali as one of three prominent Malian Muslim figures with whom dialogue might be possible.⁸⁵

Conclusion

Much has been written about Islam in northern Mali since 2012. This chapter has attempted to summarise some of this literature and to point to a number of common assumptions that seem to underpin much of it. 'Radical Islam' tends to be portrayed either as alien to Mali, brought by 'foreign fighters', familiar to Western audiences from conflicts elsewhere. Or it is seen as a stratagem adopted by locals to give greater resonance to their own interests. Many of the latter explanations are valid, but they seem insufficient to fully explain the appeal of Islamic rhetoric in the area. Nor do oppositions between local and global (and 'political' or 'religious') factors necessarily exhaust possibilities on the ground. This chapter argued that tensions between local and universal principles have always been part of Islam in the region, and indeed account for much of its vitality; and that they have contributed to shaping an intermediate, regional level that is most relevant to contemporary jihadis. This region is not necessarily one bound by peace and harmony, or indeed by perceived homogeneity. Instead, it is held together by genealogical links and the many possible shades of kinship and status that they imply. In such a context, a vocabulary derived from kinship and alliance, rather than from national and international politics, might be more in tune with the empirical evidence. Those people locally who most

⁸² Sounaye 2017. Holder (2013, 149) speaks of a "strategy of normalisation of Salafism", Østebø (2015, 15) of the emergence of a "Salafi moral economy".

⁸³ Alghabas ag Intalla, chef du Mouvement Islamique de l'Azawad (MIA). *Malijet avec Andy Morgan Writes*, February 1, 2013.

⁸⁴ Whitehouse 2018, 172 and 175.

⁸⁵ International Crisis Group 2019, 16.

fully master these complexities, and can partake in them all, are in fact those who have most benefitted from the current situation. The late Intallah's family in Kidal are perhaps the best example of this. Due to their judicious involvement in the MNLA and Ansar al-Din, combined with negotiations with the French and the Malian government, they are now by all accounts running the place – according to their own version of *sharī'a*.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Georg Klute, personal communication March 4, 2019, Bayreuth.

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Islamist and Islamised Memories in Moroccan Testimonial Prison Literature

Abstract: The Moroccan ‘Years of Lead’ were a period of rampant state violence between the country’s independence in 1956 and the passing of King Hassan II in 1999. Although a robust scholarship has probed its multifaceted aspects, the impact of state violence on specific groups, such as Bahais, Jews, and Islamists, has yet to be included in discussions about the collective memory of post-independence Moroccan. Most importantly, however, in the midst of a relentless global war on terror, Moroccan Islamists continue to be marginalised or exclude themselves from the cultural and social memory of state violence. Drawing on al-Mufaḍḍal al-Maghūti’s memoir *Wa ya’lū ṣawt al-ādhān min jaḥīm Tazmamart* (2009) and Muṣṭafā al-Ḥasnāwī’s memoir *Sujūn wa ashjān* (2018), this article provides a conceptualisation of Islamist and Islamised memory of state violence. The distinction between Islamist and Islamised memory demonstrates their different, and even oppositional, stakes in terms of politicisation, religiosity, and partisanship. The article also shows how the publishing media resignifies memories and inscribes them in frameworks of meaning that may not even be relevant to the survivors’ experience or concerns.

Introduction

Moroccan Islamists have been given short shrift in discussions of the ‘Years of Lead’. The Years of Lead, a period of authoritarianism and rampant state violence which lasted between Morocco’s independence in 1956 and the advent of King Mohammed VI’s reign in 1999, gave rise to an abundance of testimonial prison literature between 1998 and 2018.¹ Authored by survivors (sometimes with professional co-writers),² Moroccan testimonial prison literature has been dominated by two groups of prisoners: Marxist-Leninists, who were persecuted from the 1970s through the early 1990s, and the soldiers and officers who, as a

¹ This periodisation does not take into account the books published in the 1980s, which, for instance, include Abdellatif Laâbi’s *Le chemin des ordalies* (1982) and ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Shāwī’s *Kāna wa-khawātuhā* (2010), among others. Al-Ḥasnāwī’s memoir is a post-years-of-lead recording of state violence.

² El Guabli 2020a, 238–44.

punishment for their participation in the coups d'état against King Hassan II in 1971 and 1972, were held incommunicado in the desert prison Tazmamart between 1973 and 1991. Tazmamart prisoners and Marxist-Leninist activists, who bore the brunt of state terror, have since 1999 been at the centre of the memory of state violence, which has become synonymous with their tribulations in arbitrary detention. The pervasive memory of these two categories of survivors has overshadowed the experiences of a sizable number of their contemporary Islamist activists who were similarly repressed.³ Even the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (ERC), which was put in place in 2004 to investigate the violations committed during the Years of Lead and provide reparations to the victims,⁴ counted no Islamist members among its seventeen commissioners, and its transitional justice process did not spend significant time on the suffering of Islamists.⁵

I argue that, as a result of the silencing of Islamist experiences of state violence, an effort has emerged to co-opt and Islamise some memories of the Years of Lead. This desire to Islamise memory stands in contradistinction to an already existing, albeit overlooked, Islamist memory. My conceptualisation of “Islamist memory” and “Islamised memory” draws on a comparative study of the al-Mufaḍḍal al-Maghūṭi’s memoir published by Bilāl al-Talidi under the title *Wa-ya’lū ṣawt al-adhān min jaḥīm Tazmāmart: mudhakkirāt al-mu’taqal al-Mufaḍḍal al-Maghūṭi* (And the call to prayers rises in Tazmamart: al-Mufaḍḍal al-Maghūṭi’s memoirs, 2009) and Muṣṭafā al-Ḥasnāwī’s testimony *Sujūn wa-ashjān* (Prisons and griefs, 2018).⁶ Based on a series of interviews which Tazmamart survivor al-Maghūṭi gave to Islamist journalist al-Talidi, *Wa-ya’lū* was first serialised in the *al-Tajdid* Islamist newspaper before its publication in book form.⁷ *Sujūn wa-ashjān*, on the other hand, is a collection of essays and autobiographical writings in which former political prisoner al-Ḥasnāwī recounts his experience in prison for what he alleges was a false accusation of terrorism. Obviously, the circumstances and outcomes of these two carceral experiences are different, but both books are rooted in Islam and a distinct Islamist ideology. Notwithstanding this shared Islamist ideology, the degree of politicisation, religiosity, and partisanship varies depending on whether the memoirs portray an Islamist or an Islamised memory.

³ Slyomovics has a very informative chapter on Islamists in her book *The Performance of Human Rights in Morocco*, 165–94.

⁴ Instance Équité et Réconciliation 2009, 14–16.

⁵ Mohsen-Finan 2007, 336.

⁶ al-Talidi 2009, al-Ḥasnāwī 2018.

⁷ El Guabli 2017, 214.

Islamism is a convoluted concept, one that requires both a nuanced definition and a critical approach to avoid the pitfalls of Islamophobia and facile generalisations about Islam. For political scientist Muḥammad Ḍarīf, the adjective “Islamist” refers to a person or a group of people whose political ideology is based on a form of political Islam, with the goal either to establish an alternative regime or integrate the structures of one that already exists.⁸ Sociologist Abdessamad Dialmy has defined Islamism as “any social movement that is based on the exploitation of Islam in order to achieve a political gain and which precisely attempts to achieve power in the name of religion.”⁹ Dialmy goes on to demonstrate, albeit in less restrained terms, that “Islamists are obsessed with political power; they are either formerly disillusioned leftists or pan-Arabist activists or members of Sufi brotherhoods who are dissatisfied with Sufism’s apoliticism and indifference to power.”¹⁰ Islamism, therefore, is an all-encompassing political project that draws on politicised interpretations of Islam in order to seize power in the name of religion. Dialmy’s definition agrees with Ḍarīf’s, but moves beyond it in drawing attention to the fact that Islamists hail from a variety of social and ideological backgrounds, shedding light on the fact that Islamism is a societal phenomenon that cuts across social classes and intellectual backgrounds. Moreover, Malika Zeghal, a scholar of Islam, has argued that Islamist movements are also “related to state policies and institutional arrangements”, cautioning that their existence should not always be construed in opposition to the state.¹¹ Zeghal’s observation has the advantage of underlining the crucial fact that Islamism and the state are not always in conflict because of the many overlaps that exist between them. In Morocco, the pro-state positions of *Ḥizb al-‘Adāla wa-al-Tanmiyya* (Justice and Development Party, JDP) Islamist party and the Salafi groups during the Arab Uprisings in 2011 were the clearest example of the convergence of interests that Zeghal pointed to in her analysis.¹²

If Islamism is the use of Islam to wield political power, then even the Moroccan monarchy itself is an Islamist entity.¹³ For, in addition to tracing its lineage to the house of the Prophet Muḥammad, the Alawite dynasty, which has

⁸ Ḍarīf 1999, 11.

⁹ Dialmy 2000, 1.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Zeghal 2008, xxviii.

¹² Hānī 2011.

¹³ A debate raged in Morocco in March 2020 when Abdellatif Wahbi, the new general secretary of the Authenticity and Modernity Party, declared that “*imārat al-mu‘minīn islām siyyāsī*” (The leadership of the faith is political Islam). See Wahbi 2020.

been ruling Morocco since the seventeenth century, has monopolised religious affairs and used Islam as a marker of its legitimacy against both the left and the recalcitrant Islamist movements since 1970s.¹⁴ Anthropologist Abdellah Hammoudi has situated the monarchy's religious shift at the end of the 15th century, when Sufi and Sharifian legitimacy began to mix with political authority.¹⁵ Other scholars have shown how Morocco's institutional memory gradually consolidated around the monarchy, Islam, and Islamic calendars after the country's independence in 1956.¹⁶ For example, King Mohammed V's death began to be commemorated according to the Islamic calendar, thus placing the monarch "in the chronology of Islam," which reinscribed him in the "holy history".¹⁷ Furthermore, Article 19 of the Moroccan Constitution, drafted in 1962, defined Morocco as an Islamic state and conferred the title of *Amīr al-Mu'minīn* (The Commander of the Faithful) on the monarch, thus conflating the religious and temporal functions of government in the person of the king.¹⁸ As a consequence, the persona of the Moroccan monarch is presented as an embodiment of the Islamic past in the present. In the spirit of this continuity, the king's Friday and 'īd prayers, as well as charity activities, are commemorations of his ancestors and a constant reminder that Islam is constitutive of Morocco's political identity.¹⁹ Various other ritualised practices have consecrated this royal Islamism, such as *al-Durūs al-ḥasaniyya al-ramaḍāniyya* (Ramadan Ḥassanian Seminars), which bring together Muslim scholars from all over the world to give lectures in the presence of the king, and institutions, such as *Lajnat al-Quds* (al-Quds Committee), which aims, among other things, to keep the Islamic characteristics of the holy city of Jerusalem. Most recently, the creation of *Mu'assasat Muḥammad al-Sādis li-al-'Ulamā' al-Afāriqa* (Mohamed VI Foundation for African 'Ulama) has given this Islamist function a continental dimension.²⁰

Given the Moroccan monarchy's quasi-arrogation of Islam, the emergence of Islamist and Islamised memory of state violence poses a challenge to this royal monopoly of religion. Specifically, testimonial prison literature that demonstrates that the state violates the basic human rights of those who work to implement an Islamist vision of the state complicates an area where institu-

¹⁴ Darif 1999, 11, El Ayadi 2015, 37.

¹⁵ Hammoudi 1997, 54.

¹⁶ Valensi 1990, 288–91.

¹⁷ Ibid., 291.

¹⁸ El Ayadi 2015, 102.

¹⁹ Waltz 1995, 106.

²⁰ *Mu'assasat Muḥammad al-Sādis lil-'Ulamā' al-Afāriqa*, 2015.

tions and language have been shaped by the monarchy since independence.²¹ The monarchy finds itself in an aporetic position between its discursive defence of Islam and its values, on the one hand, and its use of state violence to repress those groups or individuals who attempt to apply these values to government, on the other hand. While it claims Islam and ritualises it to bolster its grip on power, the monarchy also thwarts the endeavours of those Islamists who propose a different societal and political project for Morocco. As a result of this contradiction, both what I conceptualise as Islamist and Islamised memory have wider implications not only for the legitimacy of the Moroccan monarchy's uses of Islam in politics,²² but also for the Equity and Reconciliation Process (ERC) that was launched in 2004 to turn the page on past human rights violations in Morocco. The fact that hundreds of Moroccan Islamist activists were subjected to extrajudicial processes after 2003 because of terrorism accusations, in an echo of the Years of Lead, revealed how state violence has not really disappeared, but shifted to target the Islamists as the new enemies of the state.²³

Islamist memory and Islamised memory of state violence in Morocco

Islamist memory: Reclaiming the memory of political imprisonment

Despite the different levels of its exclusion from Moroccan cultural memory, Islamist memory of state violence can be defined as a form of collective memory that highlights the human rights violations suffered by Islamist activists as such. Islamist memory recalls the countless punishments, such as political disappearance, torture, and imprisonment, meted out to activists for no other reason than their commitment to establishing a polity that abides by Islamic law. This memory is Islamist because its carriers were chiefly targeted because of their competition with the state over political Islam. As an experience that was constitutive of Morocco's memory of the Years of Lead, Islamist memory, like all other memories of this violent period, emerged as part of the Moroccan

²¹ Zeghal 2008, xii.

²² My first attempt at conceptualising 'Islamised memory' can be traced back to my book chapter "Testimony and Journalism: Moroccan Prison Narratives." See El Guabli 2017, 130.

²³ Human Rights Watch 2005a, 13.

people's political struggle against the monarchy's authoritarianism. Hence, Islamist memory is an essential part of Moroccan society's social and cultural memory. Nevertheless, the lack of substantial Islamist cultural production on these experiences has hampered the creation of an Islamist cultural memory. As De Cesari and Rigney have written, cultural memory "involves the continual production, remediation, and sharing of stories about a past that changes in relation to the new possibilities of interpreting it within shifting social frames operating at different levels."²⁴ The absence of a systematic documentary effort among former Islamist prisoners has been detrimental to the creation of an Islamist dimension of Moroccan cultural memory and obstructed the possibilities that it could open up about the Moroccan past. Nevertheless, the very few Islamists who have published memoirs continue to create possibilities for conversation among different memories of political imprisonment in Morocco.

These memory-based dialogues are all the more crucial because they show that no organised or potentially threatening opposition group was safe from state violence during the Years of Lead. Nasserists, Islamists, Jewish activists, Berber activists, Marxist-Leninists, Sahrawis, and the putschists involved in the coups against King Hassan II in 1971 and 1972 were all subjected to inhumane treatment and lengthy prison terms as a consequence of their involvement in politics.²⁵ Given their functions within the army, Tazmamart detainees were probably the least politicised of all these groups, but their arbitrary detention and lengthy enforced disappearance transformed them into political prisoners.

Islamist activists were also subjected to state violence, as a direct result of their efforts to put in place an Islamic state. Despite the state's facilitation of the emergence of the *Al-Ḥaraka al-Islāmiyya al-Maghribiyya* (The Moroccan Islamist Movement, MIM) as a natural ally of the Moroccan state in response to the existence of the Moroccan Marxist-Leninist Movement in 1969,²⁶ the state turned against the MIM. Although it is referred to as a single movement, the MIM was, in fact, not homogeneous because it was permeated by different currents that shaped its very existence. To explain the different trends and the external and internal factors that governed their emergence, political scientist Muḥammad Ḍarīf has coined the phrases *al-sharṭ al-‘āmm* (the general context) and *al-sharṭ al-khāṣṣ* (the specific context) to elucidate the circumstances that governed the

²⁴ De Cesari and Rigney 2014, 8.

²⁵ Human Rights Watch 2005b "La commission marocaine de vérité: Le devoir de mémoire honoré à une époque incertaine," 8–9, Slyomovics 2005, Mohsen-Finan 2007, 327–338, Rollin-de 2002, El Guabli 2020b, 81.

²⁶ Ḍarīf 1999, 21.

appearance and evolution of the different uses of Islam in politics by *al-Shabība al-Islāmiyya* (The Islamic Youth), *al-‘Adl wa-al-Iḥsān* (Justice and Charity Group), *al-Badīl al-Ḥaḍārī* (The Civilisational Alternative), *al-Ḥaraka min ajl al-Umma* (The Movement for the Umma), and *Ḥarakat al-Tawḥīd wa-al-Iṣlāḥ* (Movement for Unicity and Reform).²⁷ The decision to legalise the existence of *al-Shabība al-Islāmiyya* in 1969 was determined by, on the one hand, “the general context” of the Moroccan state’s fight against Nasserism in the Arab world and, on the other hand, by the “specific context” of struggle against the atheistic Marxist-Leninist movement.²⁸ Parallel to its cooperation with the state, *al-Shabība al-Islāmiyya* developed a secret agenda of jihad against the infidel state, which fostered and supported its existence.²⁹ For example, Ḥakīmī Bilqāsim, one of its former adepts, has underlined the fact that he belonged to *al-Shabība al-Islāmiyya* because of its call to take up arms against the Moroccan regime.³⁰ Because of *al-Shabība al-Islāmiyya*’s propensity to violence, most Islamists, including those who later moved on to create other more inclusive and peaceful organisations,³¹ have carried the stigma of violence with them and became easier targets when the government passed more stringent terrorism laws after the Casablanca bombings on May 16, 2003.

By 1975, Moroccan Islamists of different backgrounds paid a high price for their disagreements with the state. Once the general and the specific contexts that allowed their existence to be tolerated came to an end with the end of Nasserism and the clampdown on Marxist-Leninists, the state seized the next opportunity, offered by the assassination of lawyer and trade union activist Omar Benjelloun by members of *al-Shabība al-Islāmiyya*, to persecute Islamists.³² Although there is much speculation about the state’s own involvement in Benjelloun’s assassination,³³ what is certain is the fact that the state security

²⁷ Darif 1999, 8.

²⁸ Ibid., 16–20. I choose to translate *al-sharṭ* as context instead of condition because the latter does not reflect the larger aspects of Islamisation and the fight against it as the word context does.

²⁹ Ibid., 36.

³⁰ Belqāsim 2005.

³¹ Several prominent leaders of the JDP were members of *al-Shabība al-Islāmiyya*. Former Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane and his colleague Abdellah Baha played a major role in legalising the status of those who wanted to participate in the political arena through the channels that opened by the state to contain Islamism.

³² Darif 1999, 38–39.

³³ See an important first-hand account that revisits this period by former member of *al-Shabība al-Islāmiyya* ‘Abd Arraḥīm Mhtād in *Al-Ṣabāḥ* daily newspaper in May 2020.

complex exploited his death to repress the Islamist movement, especially its jihadist offshoot. Under King Hassan II, the onslaught on Islamists lasted from the mid-1970s to the 1990s, but the global war on terror in the early 2000s and the terrorist attacks in Casablanca on May 16, 2003 intensified the security campaigns against this nebulous entity that is usually referred to as Islamism. For instance, after the Casablanca attacks in 2003, some 8,000 supposed Islamists were arrested immediately, but only 1,000 of them were officially tried and found guilty of terrorism. The sheer number of people arrested and the harsh treatment of the accused posed crucial questions about the scale, as well as the legality, of the arrests. For example, Taoufik Moussaif Benhammou, a lawyer who has defended many Islamist defendants, declared that “violations of human rights continue. The state kidnaps and interrogates Salafis outside the purview of any law.”³⁴ Political scientist Ahamed Chaarani wonders “What’s happening in Moroccan society? In two years, between 2001 and 2003, 5,000 were arrested for the accusation of being Islamist. 3,600 were released, whereas 1,400 were put on trial.”³⁵ Using what they called the “sieve strategy”,³⁶ which means targeting larger numbers of suspects than necessary to find the real culprits, the Moroccan internal intelligence services adopted a process of elimination to release those whom they thought were not guilty of terrorism. The problem with the sieve strategy is that it suspends the presumption of innocence, in requiring suspects to prove their innocence instead of requiring police to gather evidence to prove their guilt. Many innocent people were arrested as a result of this strategy, and political scientist Mohamed Tozy concluded that the state “manages this dossier blindly”.³⁷ Up until 2018, the Committee of the Defense of Islamist Prisoners had registered the existence of 1,067 Islamist prisoners in Moroccan prisons, including a fifteen-year-old girl accused of being part of a terrorist cell.³⁸

The weak presence of Islamists’ memory of state violence in Moroccan collective memory of the Years of Lead is detrimental to institution-building and democratisation. After any period of authoritarianism, memory is a rampart against the repetition of human rights violations. However, it seems that the social and cultural amnesia regarding the violations of Moroccan Islamists’ human rights created the conditions for both the continuity and repetition of

³⁴ Chaarani 2005, 214.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 213.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 214.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Slimānī 2018.

these violations. The Moroccan ERC downplayed the repression of Islamists and overlooked their memory in its final report.³⁹ Worse still, Islamist activists were being rounded up and mistreated by the Moroccan security apparatus even as the ERC process was underway.⁴⁰ For Drīs Wld al-Qābla, a journalist and political commentator, the massive arrests of Islamist activists on accusations of terrorism “show that the mechanisms that allowed the past violations (police impunity, lack of judiciary independence, and the existence of repressive laws) are not merely a memory of the past”,⁴¹ but rather a practice that survives in present day Morocco. As a result, we can talk of a variable geometry application of the notions of reconciliation and transitional justice from which Moroccan Islamists were excluded.

In the absence of any institutional structure that recognises and sustains Islamist memory of state violence, individual survivors have shown their awareness of the need to uphold the memory of their activism. For instance, Muḥammad Ḥaqīqī, a former Islamist prisoner, started an illuminating discussion of the status of Islamist memory in Morocco in 2015. Seizing the opportunity offered by the funeral of a former cellmate, Ḥaqīqī wrote a letter in which he brought attention to Islamist survivors’ miserable conditions, writing:

The situation of former Islamist prisoners, who spent the prime of their youth in secret prisons during what is known as the Years of Lead in Morocco [incomplete]. As I was looking at the faces of some of the people present, I felt all the emotions of marginalisation, disregard, and injustice. [Also,] I read in the expressions of their faces and heads, which grey hair has already covered, burning questions about their place in the accelerating events and what role [they can] play in order to sign their life contract and confirm their presence and [think about] how to navigate their social life and its challenges.⁴²

Ḥaqīqī then asked whether former Islamist prisoners deserved their tragic fate. Ḥaqīqī contrasted Islamists’ activism with the disproportional violence the state unleashed on them:

[A]ll we did was do something that we believed in [,] to the marrow of our bones, but we were kidnapped as a result and torture was meted out to us, and the courts did not refrain from sentencing us to death, life in prison, and other cruel verdicts in presence or in absentia during unjust trials.⁴³

³⁹ Mohsen-Finan 2007, 336.

⁴⁰ Human Rights Watch 2005b, 45–48, Mohsen-Finan 2007, 332.

⁴¹ Wld al-Qābla 2006.

⁴² Ḥaqīqī 2015.

⁴³ Ibid., para. 1.

He went on to pose the difficult question of the place former Islamist activists have in Moroccan memory. He wondered if their greatest accomplishment was simply being released from jail, or whether their past sacrifices have qualified them to play a role in today's Morocco. Ḥaqīqī asked again whether former Islamist prisoners have “buried the past and turned [the page of] the violations of the past?”⁴⁴ In answer to this question, Ḥaqīqī urged Islamist political prisoners to hold fast to their duty and seize the opportunity to shape Morocco's present through their experience of its carceral past. Ḥaqīqī also lamented the disintegration of ties among former Islamist prisoners, a trend which has turned their “sacrifices into mere talk about the past as well as agonies of memories that have no extension in the present.”⁴⁵

The funeral is a symbolic space where the Islamist memory of the Years of Lead can be addressed. A moment of memory par excellence, the funeral is situated at a crossroads between the life that comes to an end and the afterlife narrative, that will outlast the deceased and shape his memory. It is this moment, which serves as a nexus between life and death, that Ḥaqīqī chose to urge those with memories of Islamist oppression to put an end to Moroccan society's erasure of their sacrifices. Also, the funeral is a space in which loss takes its full tangible form, thus amplifying the effect of his speech about memory and amnesia. In urging his former colleagues to take pride in their contribution to Moroccan collective memory after 1956, Ḥaqīqī seemed to encourage them to establish rituals around their memory of the Years of Lead, both to combat their disunity and to guarantee that their contribution to political change in Morocco would be lasting.

Ḥaqīqī did not merely sound the alarm about the disastrous situation of Islamist memory in Morocco, he also proposed a project that would allow former Islamist detainees to harness their collective energy to rehabilitate their Islamist memory. Rehabilitating Islamist memory of the Years of Lead would allow those who were imprisoned for their Islamist ideology to “play a role in what is happening in Morocco”.⁴⁶ If Islamists do not promulgate their memories of state violence in the public space, Ḥaqīqī argued, they would be “folded in forgetfulness” and others – he was probably alluding to the leftist parties – would collect the fruits of the “sacrifices and struggles that changed Morocco's political trajectory”.⁴⁷ In this regard, Ḥaqīqī prodded his colleagues to either revive the

⁴⁴ Ḥaqīqī 2015, para. 1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, para. 2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, para. 4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

“stillborn” Committee for Solidarity with Islamist prisoners or establish a new structure – all within an Islamist framework – in order to achieve four interconnected objectives: preserving the memory of grave violations of human rights during the Years of Lead, ensuring the state ends its violent practices, working toward the socio-economic rehabilitation of the victims of the Years of Lead and their families, and resolving the outstanding cases of Islamist exiles and victims of the Years of lead.⁴⁸ Although Ḥaḳīqī’s propositions are clearly addressed to his Islamist colleagues, the order in which they are presented suggests a prioritisation of collective memory above the specific interests of his fellow Islamists.

This insistence on portraying Islamist activism during the Years of Lead as a part of a larger political project that was repressed by the state is significant. It shows a desire to find a place for Islamists’ memories within the broader Moroccan collective memory, instead of defining a unique memory that distinguishes them from the rest of society. Rather than removing the Islamist experience from the generalised experience of state violence, Ḥaḳīqī exhorts his former colleagues to place their memory in the public sphere, which should not be left to non-Islamists alone to occupy. In the final analysis, Ḥaḳīqī warns former Islamists that if nothing is done to redress the Islamist memory of the Years of Lead, “death will cover us all up, one by one, in silence.”⁴⁹

Ḥaḳīqī’s intervention would not have been necessary if it were not for the silencing of Islamist memory in Moroccan social and cultural memory. Social memory here refers to various social institutions, including school, families, civil society organisations, and media which, to paraphrase Maurice Halbwachs, serve as a frame of memory, shaping how individuals remember the past as members of a given society.⁵⁰ In contradistinction to social memory, I use cultural memory in reference to the various media and rituals that facilitate access to and transference of memories in a society. Although Aleida and Jan Assmann have a restrictive definition of cultural memory as operating in the long-term at the level of myths and symbols undergirded by institutions,⁵¹ cultural memory in this article refers to the myriad forms of cultural production that reconstruct past experiences or events that are relevant to a wider society’s sense of identity and shared ethos. Under this definition, memoirs, biographies and autobiographies of former Moroccan state victims, which I subsume under testimonial prison literature, are part of Moroccan society’s collective memory

⁴⁸ Ḥaḳīqī 2015, para. 5.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, para. 6.

⁵⁰ Halbwachs 1992, 40.

⁵¹ Assmann 2008, 111–13.

of the Years of Lead. As already mentioned, Islamist prisoners have not found their way into Moroccan social and cultural memory with the same ease as other categories of state victims and survivors of arbitrary detention. This exclusion means that Moroccan society has yet to acknowledge Moroccan Islamists' contributions to the political struggle in the country. The previously mentioned Muḥammad Ḥaḳīqī has movingly articulated how Islamists have lost their "social role as political activists" and how Islamist survivors of the Years of Lead are being excluded from "national institutions, such as the National Council for Human Rights".⁵² This complaint demonstrates how amnesia in social and cultural memory could curtail civil rights.

However, rather than placing all the blame for the exclusion of Moroccan Islamists from institutions and social memory on their political opponents, it is important that we also recognise the existence of a certain degree of self-exclusion. As has been previously explained, the lack of publications from Islamist survivors has diminished their presence in the public sphere and has been detrimental to their place in collective memory of state violence, which other stakeholders have successfully associated with their suffering. Although there is nothing that prevents Islamists from contributing to cultural and social memory, two factors can be cited in explaining their absence. First, the fraught atmosphere that both state and partisan media created after the March 16, 2003 terrorist attacks in Casablanca. Media campaigns against them pushed Moroccan Islamists underground and made them increasingly distrustful of the media, which has the power to convey their message to the wider society. Second, the prevalence of the metaphysical concept of *al-ibtīlā'* *al-ilāhī* (divine trial) among Islamists might also explain their avoidance of the limelight, a phenomenon which has consequently produced an anecdotal and insufficiently chronicled record of the ordeals of various generations of Islamist activists at the hands of the Moroccan state. As a result, Morocco is a country with a vibrant Islamist movement, but with no commensurate presence in social and cultural memory.

Islamised memory: Reorienting the memory of state violence

In contradistinction to Islamist memory, Islamised memory, as I conceive of it, reclaims experiences of state violence that were not directed at an individual or a group because of their belief in, or activism on behalf of, a political, Islamist

⁵² Ḥaḳīqī 2015, para. 4.

entity. In fact, Islamised memory recovers tangentially Islamist experiences for political and predicatorial purposes, in order to advance the interests of a narrow partisan community. I suggest that while Islamist memory is a result of experiences of political violence at the hands of the state, Islamised memory is a borrowed memory that fits originally non-Islamist experiences of state violence into an Islamist mould or discursive practice that is geared toward the pedagogical and spiritual advancement of the followers of Islamism. As was previously stated, this Islamisation of memory has taken advantage of the quasi-absence of Islamist testimonial writings about arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and torture that targeted them as Islamist activists. Thus, Islamised memory not only fills the void left by Islamist activists in cultural memory, but also interprets political events from an Islamist perspective.

Al-Tajdid, the weekly newspaper of *Ḥarakat al-Tawḥīd wa-al-İslāḥ* (Movement of Unity and Reform), which is the religious wing of the JDP, provides an excellent embodiment of my theorisation of Islamised memory. This newspaper was the platform that al-Talidī, a well-known Islamist journalist, used to publish his interviews with al-Muffaḍḍal al-Maghūṭī, a Tazmamart survivor, in 2009. Even *al-Tajdid*'s title for al-Maghūṭī's narrative interview-testimony indicates a forceful focus on religiosity in Tazmamart. Foregrounding how the call to prayers arose in Tazmamart is the peak of Islamisation. Both the serialised version and the book version of al-Talidī's recorded conversations with al-Maghūṭī demonstrate how the lens of the *al-Tajdid* Islamist newspaper appropriated Tazmamart memory to suit the newspaper's Islamist ideology. Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney have shown that media "are more than merely passive and transparent conveyors of information. They play an active role in shaping our understanding of the past, in "mediating" between us (as readers, viewers, listeners) and past experiences, and hence in setting the agenda for future acts of remembrance within society."⁵³ This media effect is clearly at work in *al-Tajdid*'s refashioning of al-Maghūṭī's lengthy prison sentence in Tazmamart to suit *al-Tawḥīd wa-al-İslāḥ*'s agendas.

Moroccan Islamists' testimonial prison literature is both scarce and marginal to discussions of memory and literature. Apart from Ḥakīmī Belqāsm's *Kitābāt bada'at min ḥayy al-i'dām* (Writings Started in the Death Sentence Quarter, 2005),⁵⁴ Muḥammad Ḥaqīqī's dairies *Yawmiyyāt saḥn* (A Prisoner's Journal, 2002),⁵⁵ and Muṣṭafa al-Ḥasnāwī's *Sujūn wa-ashjān* (Prisons and Grievs, 2018),

⁵³ Erll and Rigney 2009, 3.

⁵⁴ Belqāsim 2001.

⁵⁵ Ḥaqīqī 1995.

Islamist prison literature is almost non-existent.⁵⁶ Additionally, the very few copies of these books, most often printed at the authors' expense, are limited in reach and difficult to procure. Unlike the survivors of the Tazmamart, among whom iconic survivors such as Muḥammad al-Rāys and Aḥmad al-Marzūqī have emerged over the years to become literary celebrities thanks to their writings about prison, the Islamists lack identifiable literary figures who can be associated with the Islamist struggle as a political movement in Morocco. These shortcomings are exacerbated by the media vilification of Islamists, which pushes them into a voluntary silence outside their circles of trust, and impacts their willingness to offer their memories of suffering at the hands of the Moroccan state. The end result of these various factors is the failure of Moroccan Islamists to leave their imprint on debates about state violence in Morocco. Although it may serve the monarchy's as well as some leftist parties' short-sighted interests, this weak presence of Islamist memories of state violence leaves the Moroccan collective memory of the Years of Lead incomplete. Foregrounding Islam in experiences of imprisonment that were not initially due to Islamist activity is only one response to this memory vacuum. This Islamisation of memories compensates for the absence of narratives by Islamists who lived the ordeal of political detention.

The process of the making of *Wa-ya'lū* embodies how the medium in which a work is published creates Islamises memory. In his introduction to *Wa-ya'lū*, Bilāl al-Talīdī does not hide his Islamising endeavour; instead he takes pride in the process that led to the memoir's publication. In his preface, al-Talīdī explains that even though he was well-aware of the existence of Tazmamart, it never piqued his interest as a writer until his teacher, Sheikh al-Muqri' al-Idrīsī Abū Zayd, one of the ideologues of the Islamist movement in Morocco and a member of the national council of the JDP, advised him to use the Ramadan series in *al-Tajdid* to publish "prison writings and literature of death".⁵⁷ Abū Zayd guided al-Talīdī to probe "faith positions and psychic thoughts the prisoner and the ailing express in their deathbed."⁵⁸ Abū Zayd was even more specific in recommending that his disciple use the newspaper to serialise al-'Arabī Bāṭma's *al-Raḥīl* (departure/death, 1995) and Muḥammad al-Rāys's *Min Skhirat*

⁵⁶ As I received the proofs for this chapter, I learned of a highly interesting memoir by Aḥmad Lḥū, a former Islamist prisoner. Lḥū's memoir is entitled *Ā'id min al-mashraḥa* (A Man Who Returned From the Morgue, 2021), and it has already stirred a lot of debate in Moroccan newspapers about this period.

⁵⁷ Al-Talīdī 2009, 3.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 3–4.

ilā Tazmamart (2000),⁵⁹ “highlighting the religious aspects [of these works] and recognising them”.⁶⁰ Neither Bāṭma nor al-Rāys were known to have any Islamist affinities. The former was a popular singer with the legendary band Nās al-Ghiwān whose profession would have been eradicated by any strict application of sharia law, while the latter was a soldier who assassinated an officer in cold blood at the instigation of his superior during the first coup d’état against King Hassan II in 1971. Under Islamic law, al-Rāys would have been executed in just retribution (*al-qīṣās*) for his crime. However, Abū Zayd found their memories of illness and imprisonment instructive and inspiring enough to be worthy of being relayed to *al-Tajdīd*’s Islamist readership.

Abū Zayd’s recommendation was only acted upon two years later. Although al-Talidī never explained why he did not serialise *al-Raḥīl* and *Min Skhirāt ilā Tazmamart*,⁶¹ one wonders how this conservative and predication-focused medium would have reshaped the two books. Most importantly, however, it would have illuminated the nature of the edits and adjustments *al-Tajdīd* might have imposed on these literary works in order to shape them to the expectations of the Islamist readership. Nevertheless, instead of republishing al-Rāys and Bāṭma’s memoirs, which clearly did not fit *al-Tajdīd*’s tradition of religious education and preaching, al-Talidī found his ideal candidate in al-Maghūṭī. A perfect candidate because of his religious upbringing (and because he memorised the Quran at an early age), al-Maghūṭī was predisposed to fare better among Islamist readers than the two previous candidates. Although these facts about al-Maghūṭī’s life were widely known, al-Talidī feigned ignorance about them in writing:

I knew nothing about this man except the fragments that were interspersed in the books that were published about the ordeal of Tazmamart. And his picture in my mind did not go beyond the character of a man who was the most consistent among the prisoners in his commitment to doing his prayers.⁶²

Unlike al-Rāys and Bāṭma, who were ordinary Muslims, al-Maghūṭī stood out for al-Talidī as a man of prayer and extraordinary faith. Al-Rāys has indeed recorded the various ways in which prayer and memorisation of the Quran helped him and his colleagues to survive the plight of enforced disappearance to Tazmamart, but his religious commitment remained within the realm of reason,

⁵⁹ al-Rāys 2001.

⁶⁰ Al-Talidī 2009, 4.

⁶¹ Bāṭma 2004.

⁶² Al-Talidī 2009, 4.

without any excess or exaggeration. Because al-Maghūti had not spoken to any media, nor did he write his memoirs during the height of interest in stories of human rights violations in Morocco, he was a discovery of sorts in 2009 and his own religious upbringing lent itself to the kind of Islamisation espoused by *al-Tajdid*. Indeed, the potential for Islamisation of al-Maghūti's memoirs was already contained in both al-Marzūqī's and al-Rāys's respective memoirs. Both Tazmamart survivors emphasised al-Maghūti's memorisation of the Quran and spoke well of his religious manners.⁶³

Al-Talidī, however, did not acknowledge these elements because he needed to reinvent al-Maghūti and present him as a paragon of Islamic faith. In a very dramatised rendering of his encounter with al-Maghūti, al-Talidī writes

when I met the man, and he told me about his experience from start to end, I didn't feel that he was repeating the scenes and the events that have been narrated in those books [other memoirs about Tazmamart]. I found out that he is recounting from another angle – it was the same angle that professor al-Muqri' al-Idrīsī Abū Zayd insisted on me to write about. But this time around I will not be researching in the authors' writings in order to select from them [elements] that relate to the faith aspects, but I will be writing a story that is woven in this spirit from start to end.⁶⁴

There is a process of exclusion and confirmation at work in this quote. First, al-Talidī reduces religiosity in Tazmamart to al-Maghūti's person. Second, al-Maghūti's existence confirmed the prescience of al-Idrīsī Abū Zayd's suggestion to publish works that demonstrate the power of faith in the face of death or extreme suffering, such as political imprisonment. Consequently, both the exclusion and confirmation processes place faith at the centre of uncovering memories of the Tazmamart ordeal.

Yet foregrounding faith and religiosity is not enough to Islamise the memory of political violence. This Islamisation of memory also requires the creation of a single symbol who can speak for and represent the experience of the group, particularly from a religious point of view. Although there are multiple accounts of prisoners who deepened their faith and became practicing Muslims during their incarceration,⁶⁵ al-Talidī presented al-Maghūti as the perfect model of religiosity. Religion was so instrumental for survival and resistance in Tazmamart that over the years the formerly non-practicing officers and soldiers imprisoned in this jail were transformed into deeply pious individuals who took

⁶³ Al-Rāys 2001, 178, al-Marzūqī 2003, 97–98.

⁶⁴ Al-Talidī 2009, 4.

⁶⁵ Al-Rāys 2010, 180–81, al-Marzūqī 2003, 99–101, Serhane 2005, 125–26, BineBine 2009, 67–70.

comfort in reciting and memorising the Quran, fasting, and regular prayers.⁶⁶ Even the daily schedule and resistance to carceral conditions in Tazmamart were organised around the Quran. Survivor Aḥmad al-Marzūqī has captured the importance of religion in the prisoners' life in writing that the disappeared soldiers "never felt closer to God than [they did] in Tazmamart".⁶⁷ For his part, Aziz BineBine, another Tazmamart survivor, has written that "religion helped [him] to surmount madness and death that always lurked around my illusions and my naiveté."⁶⁸ Even Muḥammad al-Rāys, who admits to having had a loose faith before his imprisonment, has highlighted the fundamental role of religion in his survival in Tazmamart.⁶⁹ In al-Rāys's assessment, enforced disappearance taught him and his colleagues the real worth of their life, leading him to conclude that "[i]t is in darkness that a human being can see themselves in their internal mirror."⁷⁰ Confined to jail cells that offered nothing but stench and death, Tazmamart detainees clung to God as their last connection to life. Religiosity was a collective experience that all prisoners in Tazmamart shared, but al-Talidī chose to downplay other prisoners' experience of religious renewal in prison and elevate al-Maghūṭī as a role model of faith, showing the risks associated with the Islamisation of memory. Islamising memory requires religious iconicity, which al-Maghūṭī was able to give to *al-Tajdīd*'s readers.

A comparative discussion: *Sujūn wa-ashjān* and *Wa-ya'lūṣaw al-'ādhān min jaḥīmi Tazmamart*

Now that I have made these crucial distinctions between Islamist and Islamised memory, I draw on *Sujūn wa-ashjān* and *Wa-ya'lū* to analyse how these two types of memory are different in terms of politicisation versus depoliticisation, intense religiosity vs ordinary Islam, and addressing collective memory vs partisanship.

⁶⁶ Al-Rāys 2001, 180, BineBine 2009, 70.

⁶⁷ Al-Marzūqī 2003, 100.

⁶⁸ BineBine 2009, 67.

⁶⁹ Al-Rāys 2001, 119; 121; 180.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 180.

Politicisation vs depoliticisation

The above distinction between Islamist and Islamised memory has emphasised how Islamised memory grew out of a normal desire to fill the void left by the suppression of Islamist memory in Morocco. Most importantly for literary studies, however, is the effect that the medium of publication has on both mediating and shaping memory as is demonstrated in *al-Tajdid*'s creation of al-Maghūti's religious persona. Despite this distinction between the two types of memory, there is an even more consequential difference between them in terms of their degree of politicisation. While Islamist memory is forged from political struggle that pitted the state against Islamist activists, Islamised memory only co-opts memories that are likely to lend themselves to Islamisation. The condition of struggle politicises Islamist memory, whereas the predicator, educational, and spiritual outcomes of Islamised memory depoliticise it.

Muṣṭafā al-Ḥasnāwī's *Sujūn wa-ashjān* and al-Muffaḍḍal al-Maghūti/Bilāl al-Talīdī's *Wa-ya'lū* exemplify the differences between these two types of memory in terms of politicisation. For instance, *Sujūn wa-ashjān* stakes out strong political positions vis-à-vis the security apparatus, the justice system, the state, and even the king. Starting from the first chapter entitled '*Asal laban karmūs hindī* (Honey milk prickly pears), al-Ḥasnāwī asserts that his memoir represents "that which we experience living in a big prison named Morocco."⁷¹ The narrator demonstrates the political nature of his arrest by underlining the role that the triumvirate of intelligence, judiciary police, and the media played in orchestrating his arrest on charges of terrorism.⁷² To give a more political tone to his arrest and its consequences, al-Ḥasnāwī wonders about the significance of being summoned to the police station on May 16. Since 2003, May 16 has been associated with the terrorist attacks in Casablanca. Al-Ḥasnāwī cannot stop wondering: "I don't know why they chose May 16 to summon me to al-Ma'ārīf police station. Is this related to a desire to keep this date alive by keeping this dossier open or is it just a coincidence?"⁷³ The date gives a strong political charge to al-Ḥasnāwī's arrest. To further depict the politics of his charge, al-Ḥasnāwī includes a reimagined version of Scheherazade's story in his book. The story, this time, includes an incorruptible journalist whom "the sultan decided to imprison for forming a terrorist cell and leading an invisible criminal gang."⁷⁴

⁷¹ Al-Ḥasnāwī 2018, 23.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 28.

The journalist and the accusations resemble al-Ḥasnāwī and his experiences with the Moroccan state. The political nature of *Sujūn wa-ashjān* is expressed throughout in the critical tone it takes towards Moroccan authorities.

Al-Maghūti's biography, *Wa-ya'lū*, on the other hand, is oblivious to politics and refrains from making any critical statements about the political situation in the country. For instance, al-Maghūti declares "I believe that the army should be at the service of the nation. The questions of reform, change or even the revolution, if they were justified, are the province of politicians and the army has nothing to do with them."⁷⁵ Even forty years after the events, al-Maghūti still reiterates "my simple conviction that I believe in is that the protection of the monarchy in Morocco is equivalent to the protection of the nation."⁷⁶ Rare are the occasions when al-Maghūti expresses a strong political opinion. One such occasion occurs when he talks about his unjust trial and underlines that he "didn't know Dlimi and [he] was not his enemy either, but [he] didn't know how he intervened at the last minute, changed the panel of judges, and transformed [his] innocence into twenty years."⁷⁷ The closest al-Maghūti's memoir comes to voicing a critical opinion occurs in his description of how Nancy Touil, an American citizen and wife of al-Maghūti's cellmate Commandant Mbark Touil, lobbied the American authorities to release the prisoners. Al-Maghūti's says

the political moment was opportune for us to reveal the injustice inflicted on us, and it was the moment we chose to write the famous letter that Colonel Touil smuggled out of jail and that reached his American wife. This was the inconvenient letter that stripped naked the 'democratic' and 'human rights' pretences of the official parties.⁷⁸

Apart from these moments of lament, *Wa-ya'lū* is a depoliticised memoir that focuses on al-Maghūti's introspective journey through the catastrophe of arrest, trial, and disappearance after his participation in the second coup d'état against King Hassan II in 1972. However, even this minor criticism of the state is neutralised by the statement that "King Hassan II was brave when he liberated us. He was generous when he ordered the Ministry of Human Rights to grant us all our rights."⁷⁹ Thus, al-Maghūti and al-Talidī, who co-authored the memoir, chose to absolve the king of his responsibility for the unjust decision to send fifty-eight soldiers and officers to their certain death in Tazmamart. While the memoir

⁷⁵ Al-Talidī 2009, 95.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 97.

⁷⁸ Al-Talidī 2009, 154.

⁷⁹ Al-Ḥasnāwī 2018, 174.

confers questionable praise on King Hassan II, it criticises the Advisory Council on Human Rights, taking pains to avoid addressing direct criticism to those who were really responsible for human rights violations. This reluctance to politicise further demonstrates that it was more important for the *Ḥarakat al-Tawḥīd wa-al-Isḥlāḥ* to teach Islamist disciples perseverance and true faith than to denounce the misconduct of the Moroccan state during the Years of Lead.

While al-Maghūti is politically passive, al-Ḥasnāwī uses his Islamist memoir to depict the security machinations behind his imprisonment and trial for terrorism. Al-Ḥasnāwī foregrounds the conjunction between his Islamist belief and his struggle for political liberation, writing that

[i]t's true that I am not a *salḥī jihādī* (jihadist Salafi) as some intelligence newspapers accused me falsely. However, I am a journalist with a combative spirit: I am combative because of my interest in my country's issues and my people's anxieties and demands.⁸⁰

He comments on his exchanges with his interrogators and writes: “[B]eyond the respectful treatment and the good intentions, let's delve into some details that were only the visible part of the iceberg of a vile conspiracy woven by the intelligence services” and the press subservient to them.⁸¹ For al-Ḥasnāwī, although it was less brutal physically, authoritarianism continues to function in the same manner it did during the Years of Lead. The pervasive fear of the authoritarian system is evident in the behaviour of the lawyers and civil society activists who refused to support him in his effort to prove his innocence of terrorism. To hear al-Ḥasnāwī tell it, Morocco has become a veritable prison. In his letter to a friend, who is also a journalist, he compares prohibitions in prison with the prohibitions that hit Moroccan society outside prison and writes that

you live in a big prison with a long list of prohibitions, but do you know that the difference lies in the fact that you are on probation and that you enjoy things that are prohibited for prisoners, but only temporarily because this nation is a big prison, and all the children of my country are prisoners.⁸²

Ordinary religiosity vs contrived religiosity

Although both *Wa-ya'lū* and *Sujūn wa-ashjān* make references to Islam, there is a fundamental difference between their approaches to religiosity. While Islamist

⁸⁰ Al-Ḥasnāwī 2018, 38.

⁸¹ Ibid., 14.

⁸² Ibid., 48.

activism was the cause of al-Ḥasnāwī's arrest on charges of terrorism and imprisonment, Islam was never a factor in al-Maghūti's eighteen-year plight in Tazmamart. And religiosity plays out differently in the two memoirs. *Wa-ya'lū*'s investment in depicting al-Maghūti as an embodiment of Islam is evident from the use of the word Allah over one hundred and eighty times in the book. This repetition is meant to demonstrate al-Maghūti's deep faith as well as his destiny to serve as a role model for the true Islamic belief. For instance, *Wa-ya'lū* lays emphasis on al-Maghūti's memorisation of the Quran, which he recited at an early age during Friday prayers in his village of Bāb Tāza. The fact that he made the call to prayer during his childhood – a habit that he continued in Tazmamart – is also used to depict al-Maghūti as a 'super-believer'. To reveal al-Maghūti's extraordinary faith, the memoir describes how this deep religiosity stayed with him throughout the years he spent as a student in the northern city of Tétouan, away from his family's village, as well as during his training in France and the United States to become a pilot in the Moroccan Air Force. Even as an adult, religion was pivotal for al-Maghūti, as this account shows how he spent the month of Ramadan away from non-fasting colleagues before the coup in 1972:

So, I spent almost a month in Bāb Tāza. Between the company of the family and taking care of their affairs, between the mosque and reading the Quran, I recovered reciting the Quran and calling for prayer at the mosque as well as the sweetness of collective evening prayer.⁸³

Al-Maghūti's religiosity is manifested in his absolute adherence to Islamic dietary restrictions, such as abstaining from alcohol and pork, even during his extensive stays abroad, which is meant to show his profound commitment to Islam regardless of any social and cultural pressure.⁸⁴ Moreover, al-Maghūti's chastity figures prominently in *Wa-ya'lū*'s depiction of his abstention from premarital relationships, both sexual and sentimental, in Morocco and abroad. These strategies paint al-Maghūti as a role model for Muslims to emulate, especially given the ordeal that he would survive in Tazmamart. The story that *Wa-ya'lū* tells aims to demonstrate that faith gave al-Maghūti the necessary strength to survive in captivity for eighteen years.

Contrary to *Wa-ya'lū*, *Sujūn wa-ashjān* depicts a normal political activist who records the ups and downs of being unjustly imprisoned. Instead of any self-aggrandisement, al-Ḥasnāwī approaches his carceral situation realistically,

⁸³ Al-Talidi 2009, 47.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 38–39; 55.

without exaggeration. In a very telling scene, al-Ḥasnāwī informs his readers that he completed the recitation of the Quran twice while he was in police custody, but he also declares that the Quran could not substitute his love for writing because, in his words, “my pen was the only thing I wished I had in my cell.”⁸⁵ Rather than mulling over Islam or trying to show how his faith relieved him of the burden of physical imprisonment, al-Ḥasnāwī proceeds to build an intersectional network of human rights activists of all backgrounds to defend his innocence. Instead of relying solely on faith and spirituality in jail, al-Ḥasnāwī puts much emphasis on action that draws on a universal understanding of human rights. For instance, he reaches out to former Marxist-Leninists, Islamist lawyers, as well as human rights activists, to convince them to join the committee established to defend him. These connections are not always smooth or productive, but they demonstrate how al-Ḥasnāwī was able to transcend the limitations of Islamism to enter into conversation with all sections of society. When he sensed an attempt to misrepresent his statement about his Islamist background by a former Leninist-Marxist prisoner he had reached out to, al-Ḥasnāwī responded

I informed you that I am an Islamist so that you understand that I have no problem of communication with leftists, Jews or atheists. I informed you that I am an Islamist to demonstrate to you my openness, [my readiness for] communication and [my wish for] dialogue, in order to talk to you about my complaint. It's us who feel the condescension, marginalisation and exclusion in the other's talk with us.⁸⁶

Al-Ḥasnāwī's memoir does not try to depict the life of a hermit or a spiritual man. It is instead the story of an Islamist activist's pragmatic journey inside an authoritarian state's carceral system. Unlike al-Maghūtī, for whom the Quran was “the treatment for all psychological ills that could befall a human being”,⁸⁷ al-Ḥasnāwī does not slip into any idealistic representations of Islam. For example, his description of the dangers inherent in the various Jihadist misinterpretations of Islam is a potent example of his critical approach. Al-Ḥasnāwī does not shy away from describing Jihadist Salafis as suffering from a “very complex ignorance and calcified stupid thought and dry stubborn character”.⁸⁸ Additionally, al-Ḥasnāwī sheds light on the lack of even the most rudimentary

⁸⁵ Al-Ḥasnāwī 2009, 18.

⁸⁶ Al-Ḥasnāwī 2018, 65.

⁸⁷ Al-Talidī 2009, 112.

⁸⁸ Al-Ḥasnāwī 2018, 113.

education among Salafis,⁸⁹ harshly criticising their misinterpretations of Islam. As a result, al-Ḥasnāwī is an Islamist activist whose memoirs are a critical account of both the state and flawed offshoot of Islamism.

Partisan memory vs collective memory

Their varied degrees of partisanship form another important distinction between Islamist from Islamised memory. A comparative analysis of the motivations underlying the publication of *Wa-ya'lū* and *Sujūn wa-ashjān* indicates that Islamised memory is partisan because it addresses a group of adepts or disciples, whereas Islamist memory is more open to addressing an entire society. *Wa-ya'lū* made use of an individual memory of state violence to educate the followers of *Ḥarakat al-Tawḥīd wa-al-Iṣlāḥ*. The now-defunct *al-Tajdīd* was only read by the followers of *Ḥarakat al-Tawḥīd wa-al-Iṣlāḥ* who also happened to be sympathisers of the Justice and Development Party, and this partisanship was fundamental to the way al-Maghūti's memoirs were narrativised in a style that depicts an overly pious al-Maghūti. The impact this Islamist newspaper intended with the publication of *Wa-ya'lū* was not an end to Morocco's abysmal human rights situation, but a larger moralisation of society and politics through the *'ibra* (lesson) that al-Maghūti's life story represents. For instance, at no time does al-Talidi, in his long introduction, say anything about human rights, but he seizes every opportunity to remind his readers about the religious angle the book takes.⁹⁰ This bias is made even clearer by al-Talidi's pre-emptive dismissal of criticism in claiming that it is sufficient for him that he "pioneered writing from this new angle or added to the credit of the Islamic literature other writings in addition to the writings of Najīb al-Kilāni and Aḥmad Rā'if, among others."⁹¹ As such, *Wa-ya'lū* is already enmeshed in a system of references to Islamist prisoners and Islam-focused objectives that narrow both its readership and its effects after publication. That said, it should not be assumed that these are al-Maghūti's goals or choices, because the media outlet that serialised his memoirs, and the journalist to whom he entrusted his memories, had a clear partisan point of view, which al-Maghūti may not have shared.

Another way partisanship manifested itself in *Wa-ya'lū* is through the erasure of the political context that made human rights violations in Morocco possi-

⁸⁹ Al-Ḥasnāwī 2018, 113–24.

⁹⁰ Al-Talidi 2009, 5.

⁹¹ Ibid.

ble. *Wa-ya'lū* makes no reference to the political situation in Morocco during the Years of Lead, and the entire book is detached from the struggles that took place in the country in the 1960s and the 1970s. Not even the Equity and Reconciliation Commission, which was put in place in 2004, garners any mention in the memoir. This is not surprising, however, given how vehemently the founder of the Justice and Development Party, Dr. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Khaṭīb, reacted to the establishment of the ERC.⁹² *Al-Tajdīd* refocused the Tazmamart story on the mystical and faithful dimension in a way that did not clash with the party's position toward the Years of Lead. Partisan memory presents al-Maghūtī as someone who survived unjust incarceration thanks to his extraordinary faith. His experience was only serialised because it demonstrates the cruelty of the violations of human rights that took place in Morocco during the Years of Lead, and because it reinforces the Islamist readership's belief and trust in God.

However, unlike al-Talīdī's Islam-focused rendering of al-Maghūtī's experience, al-Ḥasnāwī's *Sujūn wa-ashjān* is oriented towards a future collective memory, which documents the injustice and criticises the dysfunctional system in Morocco. The uniquely personal or spiritual journey of *Wa-ya'lū* is replaced by an analysis of various state injustices and abuses in *Sujūn wa-ashjān*. For example, when he was denied royal pardon, al-Ḥasnāwī writes that he had "to be born French, Spanish, 'Israeli' (...) or even a supporter of the POLISARIO Front (...) to be granted royal amnesty."⁹³ The generalisation that al-Ḥasnāwī makes from his own case reveals a lot about the way he draws on his experience of imprisonment to demonstrate that the majority of Moroccans are subjected to this injustice: "Despite loneliness, I find myself lucky inside this cell because thousands of this nation's children are crammed with their children in similar cells or even smaller, and some of them don't even have one."⁹⁴ He takes on "corruption, authoritarianism, and bleakness", which "remind [him] that the prison is outside these walls."⁹⁵ For him, the entire Moroccan society was a victim of imprisonment. In al-Ḥasnāwī's words, despite all the abuses they commit, Moroccan officials

still find time to talk about human rights and freedoms, welcome the High Commission for Human Rights, refute international human rights reports, and raise their voices in their clubs [to extol] the great reforms. They contrive to talk about new generations of [human]

⁹² Dr. El Khatib created a lot of controversy because of his anti-ERC positions in 2004 and 2005. See Aḥiyātī 2004, ALM 2005, El Guabli 2017, 130.

⁹³ Al-Ḥasnāwī 2018, 32.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 33.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 34.

rights in the meantime as new generations [of Moroccans] are being deprived of their rights.⁹⁶

Al-Ḥasnāwī draws attention to the disconnect between the state's discourse on human rights and the constant violation of these rights in the lived reality of the Moroccan population. Through and through, *Sujūn wa-ashjān* recounts the story of an abuse of judicial and security authority to raise broader questions and critical reflections on Moroccan society's suffering from social injustice, exclusion, corruption, and authoritarianism. The memoir makes a crucial point about injustice as a mechanism of governance in Morocco. Memory, for al-Ḥasnāwī, serves as a space for challenging human rights abuses. State violence, such as that suffered by al-Ḥasnāwī, does not simply come to an end by itself, but requires multiple remedies, including reminding both abusers and society of the fact of their abuse.

Conclusion

In this article, I have proposed the conceptualisation of two types of Islam-related memories that emerged in post-1999 Morocco. Using two memoirs of former political detainees, *Wa ya'lū* and *Sujūn wa-ashjān*, I have demonstrated that Islamist memory, on the one hand, is oriented toward an inclusive collective memory, and that Islamised memory, on the other hand, is a partisan memory that places predication and spiritual improvement of disciples above the needs of the larger society. Islamist memory is an advocating memory whereas Islamised memory is a hermitic memory, which has dire implications for democratisation and societal transformation.

Morocco's rich social memory has been primarily shaped by remembrances of the monarchy, Marxist-Leninists, and Tazmamart prisoners. These three gatekeepers of the past have succeeded at using all the advantages offered by various media, including writing and film, to shape cultural and social memory, even to the point of pushing Moroccan Islamists to the margins of the Moroccan memory landscape. This conceptualisation of Islamist and Islamised memory will further complicate our understanding of the presence of these memories in cultural memory and draw attention to the intersections between state violence, religion, and Islamism in the country. Although the literary corpus I have examined is limited, it is important to emphasise that more Islamist testimonial prison

96 Al-Ḥasnāwī 2018, 34.

literature can be expected in the coming years due to the ongoing security campaigns against Islamists, mainly on terrorism charges or other politically motivated accusations. Only the future will show how deeply these Islamist and Islamised renderings of state abuses will seep into the larger social and cultural memory, or whether they would remain under the embargo of unavailability to the majority of non-Islamist Moroccan readerships. Either way, the conceptualisation of these two types of memory will help to chart a different path for other scholars to explore the complexities of inventing, redirecting, and reshaping Islam-based memory in post-colonial Morocco, where the relationship between politics, Islam, and memory is a deeply neglected area in need of critical examination.

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Part III: Claiming and Translating Norms and Ideas

Lorenzo Casini

(Re-)Configurations of Islam in the Development of the Arabic Novel

Case Studies from Egypt and Kuwait

Abstract: The existence of Islam in the Arabic novel is bound within epistemological constraints inscribed in the very form of the genre, and therefore transcends the contents of specific works. As one of the most distinctive expressions of modernity in the Arab world, the novel constitutes a meaningful locus to study the way Islam has been re-configured in relationship to some of the major intellectual debates that have swept through the Arab territories during the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. This chapter examines the synchronic, diachronic and translocal dimensions of this process of reconfiguration, with a particular focus on the relationship between Islam and nationalism in Egypt and Kuwait.

Introduction

In 1997, at the beginning of a brief stay in Cairo as an exchange student at the University of al-Azhar, I was asked by the university administration to specify the aspects of Arabic studies that fascinated me most. When I mentioned my interest in the Arabic novel, I was assigned an individual supervisor who introduced me to a book that had been published only a few years before by the League of Islamic Universities based at al-Azhar: *al-Adab al-islami darura* (The Islamic literature is a necessity) by Ahmad Muhammad ‘Ali.¹ In this work, the author argues that modern narrative genres in Arabic literature have been the vehicle of anti-Islamic values, and that only the rise of an authentic Islamic literature can effectively contrast their pernicious influence. It is meaningful, I believe, that ‘Ali’s essay was the first book that an influential institution such as al-Azhar provided to a foreign student eager to deepen his knowledge of the Arabic novel. The author’s project of establishing an “authentic Islamic literature” can easily be discredited as illusory, based as it is on a normative ideal of authenticity. However, ‘Ali’s acknowledgement of the problems that the narra-

1 ‘Ali 1991.

tive genres of the novel and the short story pose to ideas of Islam promoted by traditional institutions of religious learning deserves more thoughtful attention.

Since the early 20th century, the novel has become the most reputed genre of Arabic narrative among wide sectors of the reading public. One of its distinctive aspects is the way it served to spread the national ideal, not only as an imagined community but also as an all-encompassing paradigm. The novel was accepted within the Arabic literary canon only when the individual destiny of the characters intersected with the making of the modern nation,² or, in other words, when *Bildung* narratives came to coincide with national narratives.³ Writing the nation through the Arabic novel has also meant that Islam was inscribed within the time-space of the nation-state, often in opposition to understandings of religion that the writers deemed incompatible with the imagined community projected by their narratives. Popular religiosity was re-signified as part of the national ethos while doctrinal visions of Islam were usually represented as alien to the national community.

This chapter examines the process of reconfiguration of Islam in the Arabic novel by focusing on three different dimensions: synchronic, diachronic and translocal. At the synchronic level, this process is analysed in reference to the specific time-space or chronotope⁴ embodied in the form of the realist-nationalist novel as it emerged in Egypt during the early 20th century, where it became a reference for other literary traditions in the Arab world. The diachronic dimension takes into account the transformation of ideas of nationalism and modernity in Egypt and its impact on literary texts. Finally, through the notion of translocality,⁵ this study investigates the effects of the circulation and transfer of the same literary topoi across the Arab world, and on their resignification in the light of different social-historical circumstances. With this aim, the last section of the chapter focuses on the relationship between Islam, nationalism and the novel genre in contemporary Kuwait.

In order to provide a synthetic description of these interrelated issues, a limited number of primary sources are considered: Muhammad al-Muwaylihi's neo-*maqama* *Hadith 'Isa Ibn Hisham* (What 'Isa Ibn Hisham told us, 1907), a narrative article published by Muhammad Husayn Haykal in 1925, the novels 'Awdat al-ruh (The Return of the Spirit, 1933) and *Zuqaq al-midaqq* (Midaqq

2 Selim 2004.

3 Casini, Paniconi, and Sorbera 2012, 39–152. The note refers to the first part of the book on the apprenticeship novel in Egypt. This part was written by Maria Elena Paniconi.

4 Bakhtin 1981.

5 Freitag and von Oppen 2010.

Alley, 1947), written by the Egyptian authors Tawfiq al-Hakim and Najib Mahfuz respectively, and the novel *Fi'ran Ummi Hissa* (Mama Hessa's Mice, 2015) by the Kuwaiti writer Sa'ud al-San'usi.

Ordering Islam within the bounds of modern narrative genres: From the neo-*maqama* to the 'formal realist' novel

One of the basic assumptions of the sociology of literature is that a narrative genre is not a mere container in which meaning is solely produced by "diegetic events and speech acts", i.e. the content of each text.⁶ The form itself produces content because it conveys a particular way of structuring knowledge and a specific interconnection of time and space, or chronotope. The classical study *The Rise of the Novel* by Ian Watt relates the genesis of this genre in England to the spread of a philosophical current – epitomised by the work of René Descartes – which was "critical, anti-traditional and innovating".⁷ Descartes did much "to bring about the modern assumption whereby the pursuit of truth is conceived as a wholly individual matter" and the novel can be regarded as "the form of literature which most fully reflects this individualist and innovative reorientation".⁸

In his pioneering study on the genesis of modern Arabic narrative discourse, Sabry Hafez elaborated a socio-critical approach modelled on Watt's analysis of the English novel.⁹ He was thus able to overcome the dominant genealogist interpretations of the rise of the Arabic narrative genres founded on the dichotomy between the Arabic classical heritage and the European literary tradition. He related the appearance of these genres to the deep social changes that had transformed the relationship among the individual, society and the inherited cultural tradition in several regions of the Arab world. According to Selim, this split between the subject and society was reflected in the new role assigned to the narrator as an individual observing society – the putative national reality – from an external and hegemonic viewpoint:

⁶ Bemon and Borghart 2010, 4.

⁷ Watt 1957, 12.

⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁹ Hafez 1993.

In the same way that society came to be understood as a distinct and abstract field of human knowledge constructed around a subject/object relationship, so the act of narration itself came to reproduce the split implied in this new ontology. The narrator was no longer the custodian and transmitter of an accumulated civilization or *turath* (...). The new narrator was rather an individual standing 'outside' the collectivity, observing it, describing it, narrating it, not as a communal historian but from a position that embodied a subjective but nonetheless authoritative and hegemonic point of view (...). The act of narration thus came to embody a slippery relationship between the narrating subject and the ambiguous, abstract collectivity defined as 'society' which represents a putative national reality.¹⁰

Muhammad al-Muwaylihi's neo-*maqama* *Hadith 'Isa Ibn Hisham* (What 'Isa Ibn Hisham told us, 1907) can be regarded as the last great literary attempt to "contain"¹¹ the representation of the modern world within the formal constraints of the classical genre of the *maqama*.¹² The author's appropriation of the *maqama* form to represent modern Egyptian society stemmed from his particular understanding of Islamic Reformism which was inspired by the ideas of Muhammad 'Abduh. While the latter reinterpreted key categories of the Islamic tradition in the light of modern debates, al-Muwaylihi charged a traditional narrative form with new meaning. Both endeavours, however, led to unintended results:

To show that Islam can be reconciled with modern thought, and how it can be, was one of 'Abduh's major purposes. (...) In this line of thought *maslaha* gradually turns into utility, *shura* into parliamentary democracy, *ijma'* into public opinion; Islam itself becomes identical with civilization and activity, the norms of nineteenth century social thought. (...) Once the traditional interpretation of Islam was abandoned, and the way open to private judgement, it was difficult if not impossible to say what was in accordance with Islam and what was not. Without intending it, 'Abduh was perhaps opening the door to the flooding of Islamic doctrine and law by all the innovations of the modern world. He had intended to build a wall against secularism, he had in fact provided an easy bridge by which it could capture one position after another.¹³

What Albert Hourani noted about the possible implications of 'Abduh's approach to Islamic reformism, as providing an easy bridge to "all the innovations of the modern world", can be transferred to the narrative strategies of *Hadith 'Isa Ibn Hisham*. Once the *maqama* was charged with a modern conception of time and space, the way was paved for the genre's very dissolution.

¹⁰ Selim 2004, 13.

¹¹ Jameson 1981.

¹² Casini 2011, 29–45.

¹³ Hourani 1983, 144.

The main difference between *Hadith 'Isa Ibn Hisham* and the traditional *maqama* is the particularising approach to the representation of time and space, as it is testified also by the subtitle *A Period of Time* (*Fatra min al-zaman*) which was given to the work when it was first published in serialised form between 1898 and 1900, in the newspaper published by the father of the author.¹⁴ Whereas in the pre-modern *maqama* the setting and the historical time of the events do not constitute a relevant feature of the narrative, al-Muwaylihi's neo-*maqama* is devoted to scrutinise the transformations undergone by Egyptian society – and the city of Cairo in particular – in the specific time-span of the second half of the 19th century.

The choice of the historical figure of Ahmad Pasha al-Manikali (Muhammad 'Ali's Minister of War) as the hero of the *maqama*, serves as the text's key narrative device to compare and evaluate the initial and final moments of the period of time under scrutiny. The Pasha is made resurrect after fifty years from his death and immediately meets the narrator ('Isa Ibn Hisham), a fictional character presented as a writer of al-Muwaylihi's generation who conveys the voice of the author. During the first part of the text, the Pasha's bewilderment towards the new social-political order and its institutions generates irony and serves to emphasise the depth of the transformations occurred between his death and resurrection. In the early episodes of the narrative, the Pasha exhibits a traditionalist orientation and rejects every aspect of the modern society. Conversely, the narrator, while displaying a critical attitude towards the Egypt of the time, does not manifest any nostalgia for the past and invokes a reformist approach based on an innovative interpretation of the Islamic *shari'a*.

This reformist role assigned to literature, which permeates 'Isa's focalisation and the text as a whole, is made explicit in a passage in which the narrator identifies journalists as exemplary Muslims and defines their function by referring to the Koran. This parallel is all the more significant when one bears in mind that al-Muwaylihi himself was a journalist and that *Hadith 'Isa Ibn Hisham* was first serialised in a newspaper:

[Newspapers] are one of the aspects of Western civilizations that we have imported into our society. The purpose of issuing papers is to publish articles which give due credit for value and merit, and to rebuke depravity; to criticise bad actions and encourage good ones, to draw attention to points of imperfection and to urge people to correct mistakes

14 The text was published in the newspaper *Misbah al-sharq* funded by Ibrahim al-Muwaylihi. See Roger Allen's detailed introduction to his critical edition of the English translation of *Hadith 'Isa Ibn Hisham* (al-Muwaylihi 1992a).

(...). To sum up, those who run the press occupy the position of “those who command good deeds and rebuke bad deeds”¹⁵ as referred to in the Islamic Shariah.¹⁶

The crisis of the *maqama* form and the recognition of the novel as a genre of high literature can only be properly understood in the context of wider historical and cultural developments, which contributed to a redefinition of the social and symbolic role of Islam. In Egypt, in particular, the weakening of Pan-Islamism as a viable political option – especially after the fall of the Ottoman Empire – boosted the rise of the ideological current of modernism which replaced Islamic reformism as the dominant discourse among the local élite. The intellectual whose articles mostly contributed to shaping the new modernist-nationalist discourse is Muhammad Husayn Haykal, who is significantly also the author of *Zaynab* (1913), which a long critical tradition identified as the “first Arabic novel”.¹⁷ In the period between the outbreak of the First World War and the mid-1920s, Haykal developed an intense journalistic activity.¹⁸ His newspaper articles rooted Egyptian nationalism in the Pharaonic past and popularised environmental determinism as a key notion to define “the Egyptian national personality”. Haykal’s Pharaonist articles caused a radical break with the Islamic tradition. However, like the writings of the European anti-Lumières,¹⁹ these articles recognised the importance of religion as a tool of governance and underscored its mediating role between the new national élite and the masses.

Haykal’s vision of the social role of religion is articulated in unequivocal terms in an article on the Pharaonic cult of the Apis calf, written in a narrative style and published in 1925. The author’s ideas are expressed by the character of a middle-aged man who counters the criticism of a younger person on the sub-

¹⁵ Sura 9 verse 112.

¹⁶ al-Muwaylihi, 1992b, 136–37.

¹⁷ Gibb was the first to propagate the view of *Zaynab* as the first Arabic novel in 1933. His views, however, echoed the opinion of other Egyptian critics and of Haykal himself who contributed to popularise this view (Hassan 2017, 43).

¹⁸ On this aspect see in particular the contributions by Charles Smith (1983), Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski (1986).

¹⁹ With this term, Zeev Sternhell refers to an intellectual tradition that spans from Herder and Burke in the second half of the 18th century to the present day, and includes thinkers such as Taine, Renan, Carlyle, Le Bon and Spengler, all of whom had a direct influence on Haykal. In Sternhell’s view, the anti-Enlightenment cannot be described as a counter-revolution but is hereditary of another revolution that opposed the universalism of the Enlightenment, and nourished conceptions of modernity that were in contrast to the generalisation of rights and the primacy of the individual (Sternhell 2009). On Haykal’s anti-Enlightenment modernity see Casini (2019).

ject of the religion of the Ancient Egyptians. This latter character observes that in modern eyes worshipping a calf seems a patent ingenuity if not a collective hallucination. The middle-aged man, however, provides a rational justification for worshipping the calf: Apis was a splendid intermediary with the masses of Ancient Egypt, who had attached their “good fantasies” to the calf. He adds that these fantasies (*awham*), albeit despised today, are the basis of “the latent eternal strength” (*al-quwwah al-kaminah al-khalidah*)²⁰ that guides their activity towards beneficial achievements (*al-salih al-mufid*).

Having listened to these arguments, the young man remarks that there is no harm in believing in the values venerated in Ancient Egypt, such as peace, good and prosperity. He is unable to understand, however, why these values cannot be worshipped per se but have to be associated with idols such as Apis or Osiris. The middle-aged man explains this to him, drawing on an example from the modern world. Anyone who visits a power station and sees the machines that produce a gigantic amount of energy cannot but feel a sense of wonder. If, on the other hand, a power station is described to people whose lives depend on it, they will undoubtedly begin to worship those who realised it. He concludes that “the same happened to the mass (*al-sawad*) of our ancestors with what their cultural élite (*dhawu al-ra’y minhum*) told them about Isis, Osiris, Apis and the rest of the deities”.²¹ In the final part of the article, the middle-aged man draws a parallel between Islam and the religion of Ancient Egypt. At the time of the Pharaohs, he asserts, priests and other men of religion believed in a single God. Deities such as Apis and Osiris were merely symbols that embodied heavenly meanings easily understood by the masses. In his view, the same happens in Islam, where men of religion profess there is only one God but the masses worship the symbols of their faith, not unlike the calf in antiquity.²²

The general vision of Islam and religion that the article on Apis conveys, bears few resemblances with the Islam of al-Muwaylihi’s neo-*maqama* and Islamic jurisprudence. Religion is no more conceived as an end in itself but as a

20 The middle-aged man’s utterance here is reminiscent of the final words in the following passage from *The Crowds* by Gustave Le Bon: “As far as the majority of their acts are considered, crowds display a singularly inferior mentality; yet there are other acts in which they appear to be guided by those mysterious forces which the ancients denominated destiny, nature or providence, which we call the voices of the dead and whose power it is impossible to overlook although we ignore their essence. It would seem, at times, **as if there were latent forces in the inner being of nations which serve to guide them** [emphasis added]” (Le Bon 2001, 6).

21 Haykal 1968, 277.

22 Ibid., 280–87.

tool of governance which is inscribed within an elitist project of modernisation. It is this vision of Islam that shapes the early phase of the Arabic nationalist novel, which in turn finds its most coherent expression in the 1933 work by Tawfiq al-Hakim *'Awdat al-ruh*.

Islam, modernity and the nation: From *'Awdat al-ruh* by Tawfiq al-Hakim to *Zuqaq al-midaqq* by Najib Mahfuz

The novels *'Awdat al-ruh* (The Return of the Spirit) and *Zuqaq al-midaqq* (Midaqq Alley), published in 1933 and 1947 respectively, are two classics of modern Arabic narrative. Their divergent configurations of the relationship between Islam, modernity and the nation document how diachronic transformations in conceptions of modernity and Egyptian nationalism impacted the representation of Islam. *'Awdat al-ruh* can be regarded as the most coherent and influential national allegory of Egypt. Set at the time of the national revolution of 1919, this work redefines the Egyptian community on the basis of the environmental determinism theorised by Hippolyte Taine in the 19th century and re-elaborated by Haykal as the key foundation of Egyptian territorial nationalism. The “spirit” (*al-ruh*) to which the title refers to, is the one of Pharaonic Egypt and its “return” coincides with the re-birth of the nation. The new imagined community is rooted in the myths and religion of Pharaonic Egypt – with explicit references to Isis, Osiris and *The Book of the Dead* – but also in a ‘culturalised Islam’ conceived as one of the main ‘glues’ of the nation, together with the environment of the Nile Valley and the cultural inheritance of Ancient Egypt.

Awdat al-ruh is the only case of a prototypical and accomplished *Bildungsroman* in the early stages of the development of the Egyptian novel. While in previous and later works the social conditions of Egypt are represented as impediments for the full development of the hero’s personality and his accommodation within the existing social order, in this work the protagonist finds a meaningful existence within the Egyptian society thanks to his involvement in the nationalist movement. The hero (Muhsin) lives in Cairo in the house of his uncles, as part of an extended family which represents the national microcosm allegorically, and is significantly referred to as *al-sha‘b* (the people). The pro-

logue emphasises the extraordinary unity of *al-sha'b*,²³ their rural origin and their present apathy and weakness. The story begins when the male members of the family become infatuated with a girl (Saniyya) with whom the protagonist identifies the Egyptian goddess Isis. The passion that Saniyya arises among the men of the family allows “the people” to overcome their apathy although it also produces feelings of envy, competition and division. The unity of the family is only restored after the heroine/Goddess marries a neighbour and leaves Cairo. When the national revolution of 1919 erupts, the male members of the family join the protests and redirect their passions towards the nationalist cause.

The figurative dimension of the narrative as a national allegory becomes explicit in the brief sequence of chapters that opens the second part of the novel and which is mostly set in the estate of Muhsin's parents, near the city of Damanhur. The first chapter of this part performs the ambitious task of redefining the social role of Islam in radically new terms. It takes place in the train that brings the protagonist from Cairo to Damanhur and consists of a conversation between the passengers of the compartment in which the protagonist is seated. The conversation begins when a Coptic effendi praises the spirit of solidarity among the Egyptian people and contrasts it with the prevalent individualism of the Europeans. When a religious shaykh seated next to him observes that Europe “is a country without Islam”, a third passenger (who notes the embarrassment of the Coptic passenger) corrects him: “You mean, Mr. Shaykh, it is a land without hearts, not like our country where we are all brothers whether Copts or Muslims”.²⁴ At this point a fourth passenger, “an enlightened man” intervenes in the conversation and redefines Islam as a cultural component of the Egyptian nation. The rest of the passengers – Copts and Muslims, the shaykh and the effendis – agree on this definition:

Another passenger, an enlightened man, noticed the same thing. He entered into the discussion and began adroitly to amend the statement until he showed those present that the word “Islam”, which was current in Egyptian use at all levels of society, really had no religious or sectarian stamp. Its meaning and import were, rather, the emotion of mercy, a goodness of hearth, and a union of hearths. These were emotions to be found in Egypt and not in Europe. There, the poison of utility had spread to the souls of the Europeans. A dog-eat-dog strife prevailed with emphasis on the personal welfare of the individual. Every-

²³ The exceptional unity of the Egyptian nation is one of the tenets of Egyptian territorial nationalist as theorised by Muhammad Husayn Haykal. This unity, which supersedes that of other nations, is traced back to the extraordinary uniformity of the natural environment of the Nile Valley. On this respect see in particular the four articles on Qasim Amin initially published by Haykal in 1916 (Haykal 1968, 91–127).

²⁴ al-Hakim 2019, 171.

one, both the turbaned and the befezzed, pondered this statement and this gloss. He seemed to have disclosed to them a reality that had previously been concealed under the cloak of that word. They liked what he had said and appreciated it. The topic was closed.²⁵

Published only fourteen years after al-Hakim's work, *Zuqaq al-midaqq* offers a very different image of the Egyptian nation. In contrast to the cohesive and organic representation of the community in 'Awdat al-ruh, Mahfuz's novel centres on the lacerating effects of modernisation in the context of the British control of the country. These lacerations are represented through the juxtapositions of two different chronotopic microcosms. On the one side stands medieval Cairo, of which Midaqq Alley functions as a synecdoche, and on the other the modern city. The alley is subjected to the ordering principle of Islamic tradition and a cyclical time epitomised by the character of a storyteller who keeps re-laborating on his limited centuries-old repertoire. Besides being used as a synecdoche of the national culture, the alley is also represented as a residual cultural universe engulfed in the evenemential temporality of the modern city. The latter exerts an uncontrollable attraction over the young residents of the alley, although the exit from the boundaries of medieval Cairo is traumatic for all.

In the characterisation of Midaqq Alley, Islam is identified with a fatalistic approach to life that binds the subject to the social world and prioritises adherence to traditional values over individual will. This understanding of Islam is expressed in several passages of the opening chapter: the narrator describes the misery brought by the War as the natural outcome of "our own wickedness"; the several haemorrhages caused by the surgeries of an improvised dentist (named "Dr. Bushi", despite not being a doctor) are interpreted as a sign of the divine will, while the leitmotiv of the pious character of Sayyid Ridwan al-Hussayni is that "He gave and He has taken back; all things are at His command and all things belong to Him. It would be blasphemous to sorrow".²⁶ The lack of individual will which distinguishes life in the alley is symbolised by the sweet seller Kamil. The first character to appear in the novel, Kamil is described as an obese man who can barely move and whose life is no more than "a prolonged sleep".

The novel genre is not conceivable within the conception of life which permeates the chronotopic universe of the alley. Time is "viscous" and "sticky" and does not know any movement forward. In this sense it is an "ancillary" time which resembles the one of the provincial town that Bakhtin describes with reference to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*:

²⁵ al-Hakim 2019, 171–72.

²⁶ Mahfuz 1992, 9.

Here there are not events, only doings that constantly repeat themselves. Time here has no advancing historical movements; it moves rather in narrow circles (...). Time here is without event and therefore almost seems to stand still. There are no meetings and no partings. It is a viscous and sticky time that drags itself slowly through space. And therefore it cannot serve as the primary time of the novel. Novelists use it as an ancillary time, one that may be interwoven with other noncyclical temporal sequences (...). It often serves as a contrasting background for temporal sequences that are more charged with energy and event.²⁷

If *Zuqaq al-midaqq* exists as a novel it is only because the evenemential time of modernity embodied by the new city intrudes into the space of the Alley. The story takes place in a particular moment in the history of Midaqq Alley, endowed with symbolic significance: Some workers are fixing a radio at the local café, a device which brings the events of the outside world to the Alley. The character who changes the destiny of the heroine – a pimp – also comes from the modern city. He is able to gain access to the closed universe of the Alley by joining the celebration of an electoral campaign which temporarily subverts the cyclical ritual of life.

The case studies of *‘Awdat al-ruh* and *Zuqaq al-midaqq* exemplify how the narrative existence of Islam in the Egyptian novel – in terms of functions, images and representations – is strictly interrelated with the texts’ general narrative strategies. Specific images of Islam do not convey the religious beliefs or actual perceptions of the authors but are deployed strategically, often in relationship to the construction of alternative representations of the national space. Al-Hakim’s vision of the harmonic integration of the subject within a rising national community shaped by a ‘renovated’ understanding of Islam (*‘Awdat al-ruh*), was replaced, in the aftermath of the Second World War, by Mahfuz’s pessimistic vision of the modernising process, and the association of Islam with a residual chronotopic universe (*Zuqaq al-midaqq*).

From mid-20th century Egypt to contemporary Kuwait: *Fi’ran Ummi Hissa* by Sa’ūd al-San’ūsī

The final section of this chapter moves from the Egyptian context of the early and mid-20th century to contemporary Kuwait. This jump in space and time allows us to tackle the question of the translocal dimension of the reconfigura-

²⁷ Bakhtin 1981, 247.

tions of Islam in the Arabic novel. In the descriptive sense, translocality “designates the outcome of concrete movements of people, goods, ideas and symbols which span spatial distances and cross boundaries” and, as a research perspective, “aims at highlighting the fact that the interactions and connections between places, institutions, actors and concepts have far more diverse, and often even contradictory effects than is commonly assumed”.²⁸ As the following section will show, the case of the contemporary Kuwaiti novel is particularly meaningful to exemplify the possible outcomes of the circulation of the novel genre across different Arab territories.

Kuwait has a young, but well-established, tradition of novelistic writing with authors such as Isma‘il Fahd Isma‘il (1940–2018) and Layla al-‘Uthman (b. 1945) who gave a significant contribution to the development of the genre during the 1970s and 1980s, respectively.²⁹ However, it was the traumatic experience of occupation of the country during the Iraq-Kuwait war of 1990–1991, and the ensuing wave of Kuwaiti territorial nationalism, which led to a wide social recognition of the genre and to its identification as an important means to inscribe religion within a renovated national imaginary. This social significance attributed to the novel in the aftermath of the war, empowered the Kuwaiti authors of the generation of the 1990s, and placed them in a similar situation to that of the Egyptian pioneers of the genre during the first decades of the 20th century. It is not by chance, therefore, that Kuwaiti authors such as Sa‘ud al-San‘usi³⁰ found inspiration in classic Egyptian novels and in their literary topoi. In al-San‘usi’s novel *Fi’ran Ummi Hissa* (Mama Hessa’s Mice, 2015), Islam enjoys a complex narrative existence as both a unifying trait of the national culture and (in its sectarian articulations) as a threat to the very existence of the nation. Through the allegory of the plague spread by mice, al-San‘usi represents the uncontrollable proliferation of religious sectarianism in Kuwait from the late 1980s to the imminent dystopic future of 2020, and the way sectarian violence undermines the very existence of the nation.

In a private conversation that I had with the author in February 2018, he explained to me that Mahfuz’s realist novels had influenced his style more than the works of other Arab writers of younger generations. These words are confirmed in *Fi’ran Ummi Hissa* by the way the text handles the representation of

²⁸ Freitag and von Oppen 2010, 1–5.

²⁹ Tijani 2017, 283–84.

³⁰ Sa‘ud al-San‘usi, born in 1981, won the Arabic booker prize in 2013 with his second novel *Saq al-bambu* (The Bambu Stalk) centred on the themes of migration and citizenship rights. *Fi’ran Ummi Hissa* is his third novel.

space and describes the old quarter of al-Surra in Kuwait City. The dialectic between the Alley and modern Cairo in Mahfuz's *Zuqaq al-midaqq* is paralleled in *Fi'ran Ummi Hissa* by the relationship between al-Surra and Kuwait City. Like the Alley in Mahfuz's novel, al-Surra lives a double narrative existence. On the one hand, it stands as a timeless microcosm of the nation, endowed however with a mythical dimension which is absent in *Zuqaq al-midaqq*. On the other hand, this neighbourhood is depicted as part of the wider urban space of Kuwait City and subjected to the flow of an evenemential temporality.

The elderly character of mama Hissa is the emblem of al-Surra as a mythical and unitarian synecdoche of the nation. In her house and courtyard, the protagonist spends the most significant moments of his childhood in company of his close friends: the Sunni Fahd – mama Hissa's grandchild – and the Shia Sadiq.

Although she is an illiterate woman, mama Hissa possesses a deep wisdom rooted in the cosmopolitan history of the country. Hissa's popular religiosity is part and parcel of the national culture and permeates the education she conveys to the children of the neighbourhood through proverbs and the ritual of story-telling. Another distinctive aspect of this microcosm is the presence of inhabitants of foreign origin, who are represented as an inner component of the social texture.

Next to this image stands that of al-Surra as a district of Kuwait City, a space undergoing important transformations that affect the whole capital during a time span of forty years that goes from the end of the Iran-Iraq War to the imaginary civil war that takes place in 2020. This historical-dystopian temporality is associated with the characters of the Sunni Salih and the Shia 'Abbas, fathers of Fahd and Sadiq, respectively. Through their contrasted relationship, they bring into al-Surra the 'fire' of religious sectarianism which undermines the unity of the three friends and, by extension, the unity of the nation.

The novel consists of four parts, each of them bearing the name of a mouse: *sharar* (spark), *laza* (flame), *jamar* (ember) and *ramad* (ashes). The sequence of these names conveys the allegorical sense of the story as the development of a fire that reduces the country to ashes. The spread of sectarian discourse, however, is actively contrasted by mamma Hissa and, once she passes away, by the protagonist. The most faithful heir of Hissa's cultural legacy, the hero becomes a writer of short stories for children and convinces Fahd, Sadiq and some other friends to establish Awlad Fu'ada. The purpose of this organisation, which stands as a microcosm of the nation, is to fight the plague of sectarian discourse through a radio, a website and a Twitter account. As a means of resisting the lacerating forces of religious sectarianism, the protagonist also writes an auto-

biographical novel whose title, *Irth al-nar* (The inheritance of fire), refers to the long-lasting effects produced by sectarian discourse. This text is incorporated in *Fi'ran Ummi Hissa* as a novel within the novel, and its editorial trajectory intersects with that of the work by al-San'usi. While writing his book, the hero is pressured by his Lebanese publisher to cut some chapters in order to avoid censorship. This is a fictional anticipation of the actual fate of *Fi'ran Ummi Hissa* whose sale is still forbidden in Kuwait at the time of writing. The fate of al-San'usi's novel echoes the work's thematic concern with the collapse of the nation and testifies how the inscription of Islam within the national paradigm is being increasingly disputed.

Conclusions

As one of the most distinctive expressions of modernity in the Arab world, the novel constitutes a meaningful locus to study the way Islam has been reconfigured in relationship to some of the major intellectual changes that have swept over the Arab territories during the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. The study of Islam as an intrinsic narrative element of the novel genre does not entail describing the novels under scrutiny as Islamic, or overemphasising the religious dimension of the texts. In the three novels that have been examined, Islam permeates the national paradigm in several ways: as a distinctive trait of the new imagined community, as a pervasive presence of a residual social-cultural entity, or as a threat to the very existence of the nation.

These interconnections with nationalism have been qualified as “synchronic” insofar as they can be traced back to a constitutive and structural dimension of the Arabic novel. The comparative analysis of *'Awdat al-ruh* and *Zuqaq al-midaqq*, however, has highlighted the importance of the diachronic development of territorial nationalism as well as the structural transformations that have occurred within the very form of the novel. Finally, the analysis of *Fi'ran Ummi Hissa* shows how different novelistic traditions are shaped by local dynamics and the specific historical experiences of different Arab territories. In the case of the young generation of Kuwaiti writers, the novel has become a bulwark of the nation against the divisive drive of religious sectarianism, but also a tool to renegotiate the national space.

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Farzana Haniffa

‘Reconciliation’ Problems in Post-War Sri Lanka

The Anti-Muslim Movement and Ulema Council Responses

Abstract: This chapter deals with Sri Lanka’s Muslim council of theologians – the All Ceylon Jamiathul Ulema (ACJU) – and their response to Sri Lanka’s anti-Muslim movement. The anti-Muslim movement emerged after the end of Sri Lanka’s ethnic war and flourished when Sri Lanka was exploring post-war reconciliation measures. The ACJU responded to the anti-Muslim movement using the language of the reconciliation process. Analysing the manner in which the ACJU responded to challenges faced by the Muslim community in Sri Lanka during the past decade, this chapter will argue that given the attacks that the anti-Muslim movement is mounting on Muslims’ religious and cultural life, Sri Lankan Muslims require a less vulnerable institution to provide leadership when engaging with religious others. The anti-Muslim movement’s undermining of ACJU’s authority limits their ability to intervene. This moment also exposes weaknesses of the ACJU approach to reconciliation and offers an opportunity for the emergence of an alternative leadership.

Introduction

The All Ceylon Jamiathul Ulema (ACJU) – or the Council of Theologians – in Sri Lanka claim to be the spiritual guides of Sri Lanka’s two million strong Muslim population.¹ During the past several decades when Sri Lanka was buffeted by a protracted civil conflict destroying thousands of lives, the Islamic reform movement transformed Sri Lanka’s Muslim communities’ religious practice. The ACJU expanded its activities and its stature among the Muslim population of Sri Lanka during this time. The organisation became a significant community institution, organising the *Ulema* across the country, providing halal certification to businesses for a fee, and operation of a *Maktab* school system that provided religious instruction to children after school every day of the week. The civil war ended in 2009 with great devastation in the northern and eastern provinces and

¹ See <https://acju.lk>, accessed March 11, 2021.

thousands of civilian casualties. In the aftermath of the civil war a strong anti-Muslim movement has grown and established itself in Sri Lanka. The identity of Muslims in Sri Lanka is currently under threat as all assertions of an exclusivist piety seem to trigger violence and hate. The ACJUs ascendancy as the vanguard of reformist Islam has thereby been undermined.

In 2015 the government instituted a post-war ‘reconciliation process’ jointly proposed at the UN Human Rights Council by Sri Lanka and the United States.² The reconciliation process targeted the war and recovery in the aftermath. The ‘reconciliation’ work mainly targeting Sinhala and Tamil communities, was carried out in a context where a virulent anti-Muslim movement was raging on social media with sporadic outbreaks of violence against local Muslim groups. The government’s post-war reconciliation work did not prioritise either the Muslims affected by the war or the more recent anti-Muslim movement. The crisis brought about by the actions of this movement has compelled Muslim groups to respond. The ‘reconciliation’ and ‘coexistence’ language, generated by the government’s transitional justice process, have served as an entry point for a response.

The ACJU, modelling itself as leaders of Sri Lanka’s Muslims, has used the discourse generated by the government’s reconciliation programmes to respond to the anti-Muslim movement. This chapter will examine the ACJU’s history of addressing conflict among Muslims, managing relations with non-Muslim entities and comment on the limitations of their location in carrying out ‘reconciliation/coexistence initiatives’ on behalf of Sri Lanka’s Muslim population under the conditions of the anti-Muslim movement. Politics in Sri Lanka shifted substantially with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)-inspired bombings on Easter Sunday 2019. The discourse on politics in Sri Lanka shifted from one where good governance and reconciliation had currency to one that emphasised security alone. This chapter will argue that these difficult times signalled a substantial shift in how Muslims in Sri Lanka related to the world around them, and that the ACJU and – by extension – the reformists monopoly on being an ethical Muslim is currently under attack. This attack emerged not just from the strengthened and enabled anti-Muslim movement, but from middle class activist Muslims’ own despair and difficulty in coming to terms with the bombings.

² This process, although implemented locally, was mainly designed to recover Sri Lanka’s position in the international arena from a country that was accused of war crimes to one that was addressing its past through a human rights framework.

The ACJU's declining popularity can be traced back to the emergence and impact of the anti-Muslim movement. However, their responses to the many crises faced by Muslims in recent years were framed in an idiom, devoted only to appeasing elements of the Muslim community and maintaining their own position as community leaders. Their approach, therefore has proven to be inadequate to address the challenges of a Muslim population under siege. Arguably, the bombings brought some finality to the ACJU's declining status. As the chapter will discuss, however, there were several moments since the emergence of the anti-Muslim movement and a few years prior that were already indicative of the ACJU's inability to give leadership to the Muslims' current crises.

The discussion of the ACJU's community engagement in the chapter will be carried out through an analysis of three moments: the ACJU's attempt to manage issues that emerged with reformist clashes, the response to the halal labelling crisis, and the ACJU's handling of the reforms to the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act. These will be discussed as emblematic of their imagining of a particular Muslim world. The chapter will propose that such a Muslim World – inadequately responsive to the requirements of a Muslim population living in a tensely plural polity – is no longer tenable in contemporary Sri Lanka.

Transitional justice and 'reconciliation' in post-war Sri Lanka

In 2009, Sri Lanka emerged from a brutal and debilitating three decades long conflict between the state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The LTTE were a militant group claiming to represent the country's minority Tamil population. The war was ended by a military operation that killed thousands of civilians. The transitional justice discourse did not emerge at the end of the war in 2009 but only after a change of regime in 2015. The government of Mahinda Rajapaksha, which 'won' the war in 2009, was defeated in both the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections. The 2015 elections brought to power the short lived *Yahapalanaya* or 'good governance' regime of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe of the United National Party (UNP) and President Maithripala Sirisena of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). This regime was in turn defeated in 2019, bringing the Rajapaksha family back to power. During the period of *Yahapalanaya* rule Sri Lanka saw the difficult and often debilitating coexistence of two different political parties in parliament, but also an unprecedented time

of progressive change in governance and human rights in the country. The growth of reconciliation programmes in the country was one such development.

In December 2015, the *Yahapalanaya* regime committed to a ‘reconciliation’ process supported by the United Nations Human Rights Council resolution 30(1).³ The resolution committed the government to institute “a judicial mechanism with a special counsel to investigate allegations of violations and abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law”,⁴ as well as “a commission for truth, justice, reconciliation and non-recurrence, an office of missing persons and an office for reparations”.⁵

The government’s commitment to the UN process brought about many programmes by NGOs and ‘reconciliation’ initiatives flourished in the country. Further, there were government-mandated institutions like the Office of National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) and the Ministry of National Integration carrying out different programmes. With the support and endorsement of the state and NGOs, the language, if not the spirit, of reconciliation began to have currency throughout the country. Besides *sanhindiya*, meaning reconciliation, the term ‘coexistence’, *sahajewanaya*, was also used widely, especially by those working on Muslim issues. The country’s transitional justice discourse provided a language through which prevailing problems – not necessarily taken up by either the official mechanisms or the many NGOs and quasi-governmental institutions – could be addressed.

The reconciliation programme of the *Yahapalanaya* government, that followed from the defeat of the Rajapaksas, was carried out in the context of the burgeoning anti-Muslim movement led by an organised group of Buddhist monks, the *Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS, the army of Buddhist power), and supported by Sinhala nationalist politicians. The reconciliation work and the discourse – while accepted and popular among the communities of the north and east that had been affected by the war – found little acceptance among the larger Sinhala Buddhist communities of the south. The *Yahapalanaya* regime did very little to make the need for reconciliation acceptable among Sinhala constituencies in the south. The political factions that were defeated in 2015 continued their anti-minority incitement by supporting the anti-Muslim movement. An additional failure of the reconciliation project was practitioners’ inability to link anti-Tamil sentiment that led to the war, and the anti-Muslim movement that emerged in the aftermath of the war. While attempts were made to ‘heal wounds’, little was

3 *Daily FT* 2015.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

done to change the structural preconditions that maintained the majoritarian character of state institutions.⁶

In April 2019 local Islamic militant suicide bombers, inspired by ISIS, detonated themselves in six locations — three of them churches and three of them five star hotels. Two hundred and fifty persons lost their lives and many hundreds more were injured. After that, the prevailing discourse regarding security in the country — that was critical of the reconciliation programmes of the government — won out. 'Reconciliation' as a project was undermined and 'security' became the overwhelming requirement. Immediately after the bombings, the press in India and Sri Lanka revealed that the security apparatus and political leaders had intelligence about the bombings several days before the attacks but did not act on it. This revelation added to the already existing narrative that the *Yahapalanaya* government had neglected and even undermined the country's security sector by focusing on alleged wartime human rights abuses.

The current regime has abandoned the reconciliation discourse. The government publicly announced that it was withdrawing from the UNHRC resolution 30(1).⁷ President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's election manifesto emphasised security and the president constantly references the fact that he was primarily voted in by the Sinhala Buddhist majority. Under the current presidency, minorities are under pressure with both symbolic and actual preference for the perspectives and interests of the majority institutionalised by the regime. For the first time in the country's independent history, there were no Muslim representatives in the cabinet of ministers proposed after the presidential election, and only one (Ali Sabri, Minister of Justice) after the general election. The practice of singing the national anthem in the country's two main languages at Independence celebrations was suspended and in 2020 it was sung only in Sinhala.⁸ Today the military presence in the Tamil speaking, formerly war affected North has increased substantially under the guise of the COVID lockdown. Check-points have remerged as part of COVID measures, curiously only in the north of the country. New structures are undoing much that was achieved under the previous regime and most governmental and quasi-governmental institutions addressing reconciliation issues are being disbanded.

⁶ Haniffa 2018.

⁷ See Farzan 2020. The government is not able to do so under the rules governing engagement in UN processes. However, the statement was made as an indicator of future government policy.

⁸ All India Radio News 2020.

Sinhala nationalism, ethnic relations and the legacy of the conflict

Sri Lanka is home to four major ethno-religious communities. The majority of the population is Sinhala-Buddhist, with substantial Hindu, Muslim and Christian (mainly Catholic) minorities.⁹ Sri Lanka was engaged in a civil war from the late 1970s to 2009, in which the state engaged in a protracted struggle with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a militant organisation claiming to represent the Tamil minority fighting for a separate Tamil homeland in the north and east of the country. Sri Lanka's Muslims are demographically dispersed throughout the island with significant concentrations in the western, southern central and eastern provinces. Since the 1980s, Muslim communities have been influenced by reformists such as Tablighi Jama'at, the Jamaathi Islami and Salafi/Tauheed groups.¹⁰

Sri Lanka's nationalist state project that emerged during colonial rule, and solidified with independence in 1948, eschewed the claims of minority ethnic Tamils for equal opportunities in education and language usage. The state then waged a 30-year long war against Tamil claims to sovereignty and nationhood in the Northeast of the country. While religious freedom is enshrined in the country's constitution, it also provides Buddhism the 'foremost place'. This language in the constitution permits a sense of entitlement for Buddhist organisations. Buddhists monks and laypersons and allows for countless transgressions against which the state uses almost no counter measures. Even when post war transitional justice and reconciliation projects were ongoing during the past five years, 'religious' tensions continued to be rife.

The war in Sri Lanka ended with great brutality in 2009. The government of the time remains under investigation for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Both state forces and the LTTE perpetrated violence against civilian populations during the final weeks of the conflict. The military control of formerly rebel held areas was total and civilian movement was limited. The civilian population of the region was interned pending security checks. Sections of the LTTE that surrendered to the military subsequently disappeared. LTTE leaders that surrendered with white flags were allegedly shot down. The Sinhala speaking areas

⁹ 2012 census of population and housing: 70% Buddhist, 12.6% Hindu, 9.66% Muslim, 6.194% Catholic, 0.015% Other Christian. See: <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/page.asp?page=Population%20and%20Housing> [no longer accessible].

¹⁰ See Haniffa 2008a, Zackariya and Shanmugaratnam 1997, 7–46.

were awash with celebratory rhetoric regarding the regime's military victory and the bravery of the army who were presented as saviours of the Tamil people. The entire campaign was termed a 'humanitarian operation', *manushika meheyuma*, and the victory was touted as being without any unwarranted casualties. The regime mobilised the military victory as a way of ensuring the dynastic power of the ruling family, the Rajapaksas.¹¹

The new government that defeated the Rajapakshas in 2015 committed to setting up four institutions for reconciliation as mentioned above over a two-year period. The 'reconciliation' discourse, however, functioned within a narrow ambit. It foregrounded, as it should, the groups of victims – the most affected persons – for redress. However, even in this targeting of the affected, more recent losses were prioritised over those that had been obsolete for a few decades. Therefore, the issues of Muslims affected by the conflict – mostly from the early 1990s – fell by the wayside. Additionally, the anti-Muslim movement, that emerged and continued to thrive with little state opposition in the aftermath of the war, featured only marginally in NGOs reconciliation programmes. Today, after the Easter Bombings and the violence against Muslim communities in the Northwest of the country, there are initiatives to also include issues related to Muslims.

Muslims in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's two million strong Muslim population is 9% of the country's, and are classified as both an ethnic and religious group. Muslims' relationship to past violence from the conflict and the threat of recurring violence can be understood as twofold. The ideology of Tamil nationalism that undergirded the LTTE's liberation struggle attempted to integrate the Muslim – fellow Tamil speakers – into their community of Tamil speaking peoples.¹² Muslim leaders periodically resisted this idea, especially given that 70% of Sri Lankan Muslims lived outside the Tamil speaking areas of the North and East. Therefore, at one point, when some Muslims' resistance translated not just to a refusal of the LTTE ideology but to cooperation with the military, the LTTE expelled all Muslims from the northern province. They also carried out several violent attacks

¹¹ The president Mahinda Rajapaksha had made his brother defence secretary, another brother ran the IDP rehabilitation programmes in the north, the speaker in parliament was yet another sibling, and the president's son was a parliamentarian.

¹² McGilvray and Raheem 2007.

against Muslim communities in the East.¹³ The year 1990 is considered pivotal in terms of the acts of violence perpetrated by the LTTE against the Muslims and the state's failure to prevent the occurrence of such violence. The transitional justice mechanisms proposed by the state mainly addresses the horror of the final months of the war. They have not prioritised acknowledging or providing justice to affected Muslims and have provided little space for the inclusion of Muslim experiences.¹⁴

As mentioned above, the end of the war saw the emergence of the anti-Muslim movement in Sri Lanka. The BBS spearheaded the movement country-wide in the Sinhala speaking areas, through large-scale public meetings, mobilising temple networks and on social media.¹⁵ In June 2014 there was an attack against Muslims in villages along the country's southern coast, in Aluthgama Beruwela and Welipenna. Several billion rupees worth of property owned by Muslims in the area were looted and burnt, and three people lost their lives. Government support and collusion in the violence was evident.¹⁶ The Rajapaksha regime's commitment to a new project inciting ethno-religious animosities, in the aftermath of the war victory, became evident. Politics based on such incitement have been standard fare in the Sri Lankan electoral system since before independence from the British. A decade of anti-Tamil violence – similar to the violence that Muslims are facing today but with far greater targeting of lives – preceded the break out of war in the 1980s.¹⁷ The defeat of the Rajapaksas in 2015, assisted by widespread Muslim support for the opponent, seemed to augur an end to that brief but intense period of anti-Muslim mobilisation. However, the occurrence of further events of violence in Galle in 2017 and in Amapara and Kandy in 2018 meant that the structural preconditions that made violence a possibility, and lackadaisical state response to such violence an inevitability, were still in place. It also indicated the extent to which anti-Muslim sentiment had become normalised within a few years.

In the aftermath of the ISIS-inspired bombings in April 2019 everything changed. The Rajapaksas were able to legitimately claim that their agenda of nationalism and security was an urgent necessity. There were attacks against Muslims in May 2019 in the north-eastern districts of Kurunegala and Halawatha in a pattern that is now familiar. And as this chapter emphasises, the Ra-

¹³ Hasbullah 2001. Also see Haniffa 2011, 49–62.

¹⁴ Mihlar 2018.

¹⁵ See Haniffa 2016a, Holt 2016, Nuhman 2016.

¹⁶ See Haniffa 2016b.

¹⁷ Manor 1984.

japaksa family is back in power and their Sinhala supremacist politics are now state policy.

Recent analyses describe the Easter Sunday 2019 events as emerging from and as an inevitable outgrowth of the 'Wahabi' infiltration of the Sri Lankan Muslim population.¹⁸ Some writers emphasise the diversity within the Muslim population and warn against using the terrorist label on all Muslims. However, all commentators seem committed to the narrative of Muslims' now decades-old transformation through religious reformism¹⁹ as the necessary contextual determinant of 'radicalisation'.²⁰

The All Ceylon Jamiathul Ulema

The ACJU website claims that the organisation was founded in 1926, while M.M. Mahroof, a scholar exploring the history of the Ulema in Ceylon and Sri Lanka, dates the initiative to organise the Ulema to 1945.²¹ The ACJU was officially recognised by the state in 2000 by an act of parliament. While initially the membership consisted of Ulema located in and around the city of Colombo, later the organisation incorporated Ulema from other regions, and now it is an umbrella group with branches in all districts in the country. Currently they boast 134 branches throughout the country and 5000 members. The head office consists of 15 committees that are run by members of the ACJU together with a few professionals and many volunteers. In addition to the community level interventions, the ACJU has also been periodically consulted and mobilised by the state as a representative institution of Muslims. The ACJU spoke in support of the government delegation to the UNHRC sessions in 2011 when the regime was pressured to investigate war crimes allegations.²² Currently, in the aftermath of the Easter bombings, the government is in conversation with the Ulema concerning 'deradicalisation'.²³ The ACJU has also been a representative body in meetings with the UN and bilateral and multilateral donors.

¹⁸ Gunasingham 2019, 8–13.

¹⁹ See Haniffa 2008a, Nuhman 2007, Mihlar 2016, and Faslan and Wanniasinkam 2015.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Mahroof 1995, 25–50.

²² See ACJU website: <https://acju.lk/en/>.

²³ Interview with ACJU at head office, January 2020.

ACJU and reconciliation

As stated earlier, the language of the transitional justice discourse, and especially its least controversial terminology of coexistence and reconciliation, has become thoroughly integrated into the Sri Lankan NGO and civil society language. Substantial amounts of money were spent on the government programme, and also for NGO programmes that support the process. The ACJU uses the term ‘reconciliation’ as a matter of course in all of its statements on Muslims and their dealings with ‘religious others’. This work included producing a series of publications in the Sinhala language addressing the racist assertions of the anti-Muslim movement. The ACJU also issued a statement on coexistence that offers an analysis of the current problems and provides the country’s Muslim population with instructions on how to maintain coexistence.²⁴ The ACJU proclamation is entitled *Declaration (...) Regarding Coexistence among the Communities of Sri Lanka*.²⁵ In making this declaration the ACJU draws from the examples of the prophet and the Sahabas and the manner in which they treated the minorities under Muslim rulers.²⁶ In an interview in January 2020, ACJU representatives stated, that they engaged in reconciliation activities through carrying out welfare work with low income multi-religious communities.

However, as already stated, the reconciliation discourse was constantly undermined by the *Yahapalanaya* government’s political opponents and its popularity in the South was not uniform. Additionally, the fact that the anti-Muslim movements’ main target is Muslims’ too obvious religiosity, the ACJU as representatives of the religious leadership are constantly under attack.

²⁴ ACJU 2016.

²⁵ The document lists activities that Muslims should engage in to ensure coexistence. In listing such activities the ACJU document mirrors the accusations of the anti-Muslim movement. While the ACJU can perhaps be commended for being reflexive regarding Muslims’ own way of life, the uncritical acceptance of the terms of the anti-Muslim movement are troubling and require further analysis. ACJU 2016, 9.

²⁶ Examples of court rulings among the early Muslim community with evidence of fair treatment of religious others in litigation, the case of early Muslim leaders providing sustenance for the weak, etc., were cited. All of the examples quoted were about the benevolence of Muslims when in a position of power over minority communities under their rule. The fact that in Sri Lanka Muslims functioned as a minority, affected by two sets of majoritarian ideals, did not inform the declaration.

ACJU attempts at mitigating conflict among Muslim piety groups

One of the most significant interventions of the ACJU in recent years was its attempt to pull together the differently affiliated Muslim piety groups under one coordinating body to minimise the conflict among such groups in the country due to their respective *da'wa* projects (to bring 'straying' Muslims back to the fold). This section illustrates an intervention by the ACJU that was brought about in a context where its authority was not under attack.

During the conflict years, reformist groups experienced great success and were able to substantially transform the country's Muslims' relationship to practice. During the more than 30 years of the war, when the reformists flourished, violence often broke out among different groups who would demonise one another as part of their propagation strategies. The most significant of the disagreements have been documented as being between the Salafis and Tarika groups.²⁷ However, the Muslim religious field in Sri Lanka involved not just Salafi and Tarika groups, but the Tabligh Jamaat, and the Jamaathi Islami, and more recently as documented by Rasiah,²⁸ newly formed Shia groups as well. The majority representation in the ACJU is from the Tabligh Jamaath, and the Tabligh networks are arguably the most widespread and influential among Muslim communities across the country. The Jamaathi Islami has significant influence in particular communities. The Tauheed Jamaat, a Salafi group, is smaller but has mobilised urban working class communities and is vocal and public in its interventions.²⁹ The 'Sunnat Jama'at' is an umbrella term used to refer to members of different Tarika groups that are relatively well organised. The reformists of all hues have historically carried out their particular *da'wa* activities by positioning themselves as different from the Tarika affiliated groups and through denigrating beliefs and practices of such groups as *shirk* (engaging in idolatry) and *bidat* (unsanctioned innovations).

In 2009, there was an incident in the town of Beruwela along the island's southern coast. The South of Sri Lanka has been the centre of the Muslim elite

²⁷ The term 'Tarika group' is one that is commonly used among the middle class Muslims in Sri Lanka to refer to those who are members of Sufi Tarikas. These groups identify as members of the All Ceylon Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama'ath. See Spencer et al. 2015.

²⁸ Rasiah 2020.

²⁹ Their public interventions are somewhat muted in the aftermath of the Easter Bombings since they have been identified as the 'Sunnat Jama'at'.

and the concentration of Muslim economic, social and political power. It is a place where the Muslims pride themselves on having been entrenched since the first Arab settlers of the 6th century and where Tarikas have long antecedents. There is also a concentration of Muslim gemstone trading wealth in Beruwela. The gemstone trade, for which Sri Lanka is internationally renowned, was a Muslim monopoly since the time of the British colonial administration. Although that has now shifted, a considerable percentage of the trade continues to be in Muslim hands located to a large extent in the village of Beruwela.

An altercation occurred between the congregation of a Tauheed Jamaat mosque established in 2002, called the Masjidul Rahuman, and members of the Alaviya Tarika. The Alaviya Tarika had their annual feast at the Beruwela Ketchimalai mosque with the participation of a crowd of close to 80,000 people. The next day, on July 24, 2009, the Quadiriya Tarika, organised around the Buhari mosque across the road from the Masjidul Rahman, were to have their *kanduri* (feast). The Masjidul Rahman Jumma sermon that day stated that the feasting, carried out by the Alaviya Tarika and planned by the Quadiriya Tarika, was not permitted in Islam and those carrying them out were *kafirs* (nonbelievers). The Masjidul Rahman was attacked by a large crowd that same day and it resulted in the death of two persons. The event sent shock waves across Muslim communities in the south of Sri Lanka.

Such altercations between Tarika and Tauheed groups had been previously reported from the war-affected eastern province. The Tariqathul Mufliheen (TM) had been excommunicated by the ACJU in 1989 on the basis that their beliefs were 'un-Islamic'.³⁰ The group took the ACJU to court, and in 1996 the ACJU withdrew the *fatwa* that declared them *murthads* (apostates from Islam) and deemed the proclamation as not having been made. In 2004, and later in 2007, there was widespread violence in the town of Kattankudi against the group by groups known as 'Tauheed'. An added indicator of the bad relations in the community was the distribution of handbills prohibiting the "Muslim" people in the village from having any social or economic relations with the '*murthads*'.³¹

In December 2006 and January 2007, the newspaper *The Sunday Leader* reported that, in the aftermath of the revocation of the Fatwa in 1996, the members of the TM were denied the registration of births and were prevented from burying their dead in Kattankudi. There were two incidents reported where the leader of the group and a follower, who were buried in Kattankudi, were ex-

³⁰ Handunnetti and Wamanan 2007.

³¹ ACJU 2006. The distribution of the handbill occurred in the aftermath of the incidents of December 19, 2006.

humed by the Tauheed group, and in the case of Payilwan (the leader), his body was burnt and buried elsewhere.³² The ACJU did not intervene to manage the conflict. In fact, an ACJU representative had stated to newspapers that the ideas of Abdulla Payilwan, the head of the Tarika group, were 'un-Islamic'.³³ The Eastern Province is far away from the political and social centres of Colombo, and Kandy in the Western and Central Provinces. It was also a time when the war was being fought in the area. The political and economic power that was wielded in a southern town like Beruwela was not comparable to the distant and war-torn Eastern town.

The violence in Beruwela, happening two and a half years after the last incidents in the East, was indicative of a trend that required intervention and management. Additionally, internal Muslim community altercations were already being written about in terms of the global discourse of a Wahhabi invasion threatening terrorist violence.³⁴

The Declaration of Unity

In 2009, in response to the violence in Beruwela, the ACJU organised a structure under their leadership that would work to resolve differences between the many Muslim groups. It was the first time since the advent of such different groups that an attempt was made to bridge differences and to acknowledge their existence as something positive, and as having antecedents in Islamic history. The ACJU published a document entitled *The Declaration of Unity*, in which it stated its position on unity among the various Muslim groups, listed the groups that had joined together, and outlined the principles on the basis of which an adjustment of differences were made.³⁵

Asserting that "our Imams as well as Islamic Scholars have given us ample guidance on how to act during disagreements", the statement calls attention to the fact that "prominent Ulema who represent Tarikas, All Ceylon Tabligh Jama'ath, Jamathi' Islami together with other Thowheed institutions will be the members of this council".³⁶ The council was to be called "The Council of Coop-

³² The incident was aired repeatedly in the press as indicative of the spread of Wahhabism among Muslim communities in the East and its terrifying consequences.

³³ Handunnetti and Wamanan 2007.

³⁴ Haniffa 2008b.

³⁵ ACJU n.d., 2.

³⁶ Ibid.

eration and Coordination". The document also references the fact that the various Tarikas, as well as the Daa'wa organisations, have a long history in the country and have always worked for the "spiritual fortification of the community". The document stated:

Although few minor disagreements do exist over different views and interpretations among these factions, their overall objectives had been identical and hitherto, there were no serious conflicts among them that could impede the general accord of the Muslim community.³⁷

The document further stated that

[d]uring several sittings the council agreed that it is of paramount importance to reestablish the unity of the Umma" and established "certain guidelines" so that "no similar unpleasant incidents occur in the name of the religion in the country."³⁸

The importance of the manner in which differences are incorporated into a common Islamic heritage cannot be emphasised enough. In the 1990s, when the reformist ideologies were being consolidated among Sri Lanka's Muslim communities, substantive damage was wrought on middle class' kin networks through the different *da'wa* groups' insistence on different realms of practice. The recognition of the possibility of difference, which informed the bedrock of the faith here, is a significant shift. However, as many subsequent developments indicated, the shift required much greater engagement to provide tangible results.

This assertion of equanimity was also a fundamentally male exercise, the rhetoric regarding tolerance of different ideas and approaches was not transposed to address issues that emerged with regards to women (more on this below). The agreement also further consolidated the leadership and authority of

³⁷ ACJU n.d., 2. Their lack of reference to the violence in the East is disingenuous and must be recognised as such.

³⁸ ACJU n.d., 3. The justification that the ACJU produces for the inclusion of the various groups draws from what they claim are accepted Islamic principles. For instance, the *Declaration of Unity* states that the Imams, and Sahabas too, had differing opinions and that there were "four main reasons" for such differences. These are differing views on the authenticating Hadith narrations, the differences of views in Hadith narrations that are considered authentic, linguistic ambiguities, and the different criteria for establishing laws. The declaration also states that therefore these differences should be treated as blessings of the Almighty and it should be further understood that each of them are just "practical, logical, natural, as well as unavoidable in their own rights" (ibid.). The acceptance of this position is of central importance to the management of theological differences in the future.

the ACJU. While the composition of the council is said to be made up of members from all organisations, the leadership is held by Sheikh Agar Mohamed, the long serving deputy head of the ACJU. The statement is presented by the ACJU and the signatories are Sheikh Rizwi Mufthi, the head of the ACJU, and Sheikh Agar Mohamed. The names of representatives of other groups are not included.

There are still groups – like the Tauheed Jamaat, for instance – that are left out of the ACJU's council, and who question their legitimacy.³⁹ After the advent of the anti-Muslim movement in 2013 the Tarika groups found a new champion. They branded themselves the 'traditional' *sampradayaka* Muslims of the country, following the rhetoric of the BBS monks. They call themselves the Muslims of Sri Lanka who have resisted 'Arabisation' and who were in fact victimised by the *anthavadi* (extremist) Muslims.⁴⁰ They in turn have provided the Ven. Galabodaththe Gnanasara with language through which to depict non-Tarika groups as 'extremist'.⁴¹ Representatives of the Tarikas have appeared before commissions investigating the April bombings and have given evidence regarding Muslim 'extremist' excesses.

Resolution of the halal issue

Anti-Muslim messaging began to increase across social media in 2010 and 2011, and the monk-led Bodu bala Sena (BBS) organisation emerged as the movement's public face in 2012.⁴² The BBS' first countrywide campaign in early 2013 was against the ACJU's halal certification programme. Halal certification be-

³⁹ Faslan and Wanniasinkam 2015.

⁴⁰ Quotation marks indicate the prevalence of these terms in the language used by known anti-Muslim activists.

⁴¹ Haniffa 2019a, 2019c.

⁴² As a result of the groups' emergence, messages criticising Muslim women's dress practices as 'Arabisation'; halal meat production as inhumane; halal-labelling practices as illegitimate and as exploitative of non-Muslim consumers, became widespread. Additionally, rhetoric regarding the 'backwardness' of Muslim women, Muslims' businesses as deliberately undermining Sinhala ventures, Muslims' tendencies to buy up land and 'colonise' neighbourhoods, and a Muslim conspiracy to procreate and become the majority population in the country, attained the status of fact throughout the island. The movement's initial method of dissemination was to hold large-scale public meetings using the trappings of Buddhist ritual gatherings. The meeting rhetoric was supported by a media campaign that mirrored the same language. Today, the hate rhetoric has become part of common-sense knowledge and Sinhala Buddhist groups have been mobilised for violence against Muslims quite frequently.

came a requirement when multi-national food companies arrived in Sri Lanka, and Sri Lankan companies began to export consumer goods to Southeast Asian and Middle Eastern markets.⁴³ The BBS accused the ACJU of implementing a 'Muslim extremist' plan through the halal certification process.

The ACJU involvement with halal certification began in 1999, and the first certification was granted in 2000 to two companies providing poultry products. The ACJU engaged professionals in food science, agriculture and chemistry, prior to beginning to certify food-processing establishments in 2004. In a bid for greater professionalisation, ACJU representatives visited halal certification bodies in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and South Africa in 2005. There had been an institution issuing certifications prior to the ACJU, but with the increasing influence of reformism and Muslims' preoccupation with authenticity and authentication⁴⁴ the ACJU, as a more authoritative entity with 'gatekeeper' aspirations, was considered to be best suited by sections of the Muslim community (and endorsed by the political leadership).

The chief ideologue of the anti-halal campaign, the Ven. Gnanasara, stated that halal was a process of sanctifying goods for the worship of Allah, and that these goods were then given to Buddhist monks in temples. He claimed that non-Muslims were being forced to consume halal-labelled goods and to pay for a process that they did not require. He argued further, that the ACJU was insisting on having access to secret product recipes prior to providing certification, and thereby forcing Sinhala businesses to reveal trade secrets. The ACJU was also accused of controlling the market by asking Muslim consumers not to use uncertified products. He argued further, that the money raised through halal was funding jihadist violence.⁴⁵

Ultimately the issue became identified as one about the legal basis for ACJU's certification process and critiqued for not abiding by prevailing market logic. In 2006, the ACJU attempted to acquire state recognition as the only legally entitled body for providing certifications. According to the government's commitment to market principles, however, the state could not endorse a monopoly even for the provision of religious authentication.

⁴³ Field work in Sri Lanka in 2013. This is also documented in my essay of 2017 (Haniffa 2017).

⁴⁴ Deeb 2006.

⁴⁵ While the BBS focus was on the certification process, other commentators also discussed the issue of halal slaughter and the meat industry. This issue, however, was not foremost in the discussion regarding the halal certification process. For a fuller discussion of the halal crisis, see Haniffa 2017.

When the halal controversy erupted in early 2013, there was no directive on halal by the Consumer Affairs Authority, or any other government body. The ACJU was accused – by the then-leader of the opposition, among others – of having no legal basis to provide certification. The opposition leader echoed sentiments that were widely expressed in both traditional and social media: halal was said to be ‘immoral’, ‘illegal’ and an ‘unethical trade practice’.⁴⁶ The ACJU’s claim that it was issuing certification on the basis of its religious authority, and the endorsement they received for their processes from international halal certification bodies, was considered inadequate without state authorisation.

The ACJU failed to control the narrative regarding Halal in any way. Their usual means, the pulpit, backed up by the formidable organisational strength of their mosque network, could not meet the challenge first posed by the BBS and later by proponents of the market logic. Initially no media outlet would give them time to tell their side of the story. They could not even buy space. Then, when they did have time, their assertions of authority as members of the Ulema council had little purchase on the Sinhala media. Their lack of experience in speaking with anyone who was not a Muslim and who did not question their authority, was immediately apparent. Their attempt to claim that they were not carrying out halal certification for profit but as a service to the community was dismissed. In February 2013, the ACJU attempted to offer the government ownership of the halal certification process. The ACJU, as mentioned earlier, had good relations with the regime in power, but those relationships were not adequate to withstand the momentum generated by the anti-Muslim movement’s campaign. The government refused to entertain the ACJU’s request. The state appointed a Parliamentary Select Committee to investigate the issue, but the mandate of the committee was framed in the logic of the anti-Muslim movement. Its objective was to investigate “whether locally- or internationally-funded religious extremism had infiltrated Sri Lankan society.”⁴⁷

In order to diffuse prevailing tensions and to preserve the halal certification process the loosely organised Muslim Business Council came together with the Chamber of Commerce and formulated a transition plan. The main aim of the initiative was to preserve certification for export purposes, as required by the Sri Lankan economy, and erase any gratuitous religious signage linked to the process. Halal labelling on consumer goods was suspended, giving in to the anti-Muslim movement’s call. The ACJU was to give up the halal certification to an

⁴⁶ Documented in Haniffa 2017.

⁴⁷ *Khabar South Asia* 2013. See also Thirupathy and Nathaniel 2013.

independent company. Until the setting up of the company, halal certification was provided at no cost for export purposes. The Halal Accreditation Council (HAC) was registered according to the Companies Act and branded itself as a 'market responsive' and a 'market friendly' institution. The halal label was changed from the mosque and Arabic lettering, used by the ACJU, to the initials HAC, the Halal Accreditation Council. Muslim consumers could check certification through a website and there was an app they could download.⁴⁸

The ACJU's inability to adequately represent the perspective of the country's Muslim population during conflicts with religious others was laid bare with the halal crisis. Given that they were running a fee levying enterprise in monitoring and providing halal certification, it was possible for commentators to critique them in keeping with a notion of 'market ethics' and deemphasise their role as religious leaders. Additionally, the anti-Muslim racism prevailing in the country provided licence for the media as well as for politicians to show no respect to ACJU members' identity as religious leaders. The ACJU seemed surprised by this reaction and unable to navigate the dismissal of their authority. The Muslim Business Council's intervention indicated that the larger Muslim community, too, would work to limit the role that the ACJU should play in the future.

Reforms to the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA) of 1951

Another arena in which the ACJU has made its presence felt has been the debate on reforms to the *Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA)*. A committee appointed by the Ministry of Justice in 2009 under Justice Saleem Marsoof was mandated with producing a report with suggestions to amend the current MMDA (1951)⁴⁹ Unfortunately, the report released in 2018 (after nine years of deliberations) was a split report, with the group led by the Ulema objecting to some key recommendations made in the main report. Permitting women to become *quazis* (judges), specifying the age of marriage to 18 years in keeping with the general law, removing the reference to 'sect' and thereby rendering a particular *Madhab* (school of Islamic jurisprudence) that a person belongs to as irrelevant in the application of the MMDA, are some of the provisions that the ACJU is rejecting.

⁴⁸ Interview with Ali Fatharali of the HAC.

⁴⁹ See Hamin and Cegu Issadeen 2016.

Under the *Yahapalanaya* government, and in tandem with its reconciliation programme, the government instituted a committee to entertain public representations on constitutional reform – The Public Representations Committee (PRC). Muslim women activists organised at the regional level and asked for either a reform or a repeal of the MMDA.

In response to the activism around the PRC, and given the delays of the Marsoof committee, the government announced the appointment of a Cabinet Sub-Committee to make proposals to amend the MMDA of 1951.⁵⁰

In March 2017, the Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) after sitting on the Marsoof committee since 2009, stated in a confidential submission to this subcommittee that the MMDA was perfect as it was and required no change. The statement contained justifications based on *hadith* for leaving the age of marriage unspecified and women barred from being *quazis*. It was leaked to the media and was published in the *Colombo Telegraph*.

Justifying their opposition to the amendment that permits Muslim women too, to become *quazis* under the MMDA, the ACJU document states:

With regards to the appointment of female *quazis*[.] the majority of the *Ulema* are of the opinion that there is no basis for this in the Shariah.

It is not permissible for a woman to be appointed as a judge, and if she is appointed, the one who appointed her is sinning (...) her appointment is invalid and her judgements carry no weight[.] no matter what ruling she passes. This is the view of the Malikis, Shafies and Hanbalis and some of the Hanafis.

Rationale behind this view is based on Quran and Sunna which states: Men are the protectors and maintainers of women (4:34), [m]en have a degree of responsibility over them (2:228), and Hadeeth says [that] no people will ever prosper who appoints a woman in charge of their affairs.⁵¹

The statement further reads:

The majority of the community will also not accept the appointment of female *quazis* due to practical reasoning. One should not consider this as injustice to women but rather as protection of the rights, [the] honor and [the] modesty of women. However[,] the appointments of females in the advisory board and also as members of the [j]ury is recommended. That would support the *quazi* court system in a valuable manner.⁵²

50 Minister of Justice, Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe was quoted in the Daily News saying that “he was compelled to appoint the Cabinet Sub-Committee as the previous committee appointed in 2009 to look into MMDA reforms had not submitted their report even after seven years of deliberations” (Imtiaz 2016).

51 *Colombo Telegraph* 2017a.

52 Ibid.

The ACJU had discussed its position in Friday jumma sermons utilising its formidable network across the country, and claimed to have the support of the wider community. However, there was strong opposition from fellow Muslims in the English press. It must be noted at this point that Sri Lanka already has many Muslim women magistrates, and one president's council who is Deputy Solicitor general. The ACJU's position on refusing women to adjudicate on matters of personal laws made little rational sense.

In an unprecedented intervention Justice Marsoof, head of the Committee on recommending reforms, also came out strongly against the ACJU, and made a statement on his Facebook page that was subsequently published. He accused the ACJU of acting in bad faith and attempting to influence the committee. According to Justice Marsoof:

Mufthi Rizwie and Mubarak Moulavi[,] both of ACJU[,] are members of the Committee chaired by me. According to news reports, a delegation of ACJU have gone around meeting Muslim Members of Parliament and handed over various documents including working drafts prepared by me for consideration of the Committee under confidentiality.⁵³

He went on to say:

Already Jumma sermons and signature campaigns have been conducted to object to any amendments to the MM&D Act on the purported basis that it is of divine origin, and some members of my Committee feel intimidated and may tow the ACJU line.⁵⁴

The Women's Action Network (WAN) – that had given leadership to the activism around the PRC – also responded strongly to the ACJU statement. They released a statement entitled “Religious Leaders Cannot be Trusted to reform the MMDA” and urged the government to intervene to protect women's rights.⁵⁵ According to WAN:

The ACJU's extreme and rigid position on legal reform shows the regressive nature of their perspectives. WAN is of the firm belief that actors who are unable to win the trust and confidence of [their] own community should be disqualified from serving on a Committee meant to usher in positive changes.⁵⁶

⁵³ *Colombo Telegraph* 2017b.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Colombo Telegraph* 2017bc

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

They concluded by stating: "It is time for the State to act like the State and protect the rights of all Sri Lankans, including Muslim women and girls, from those who seek to allow injustice in the name of religion!"⁵⁷

It seemed as if the statement from the ACJU had pushed the WAN to ask for the state to intervene, overriding the concerns of the Ulema. In the wake of the ACJU submission, stating that the reforms were unnecessary, there was an outpouring of 'angry' articles criticising the ACJU and questioning their scholarly competence to decide legislation.

In an article entitled "MMDA: Angry Civil Society Demand Radical Changes to the ACJU", veteran Muslim journalist Latheef Farook stated the following:

(T)he ultimate question has never been raised; what is the credibility of the ACJU and Rizvi Mufti? What are the criteria for scholarship to legislate in Islam, and do the members of the ACJU meet those criteria? Are they really scholars? As an intellectual body that is also granted the privilege to legislate, what knowledge does the ACJU have regarding law? Can a scholarly institution that refuses to acknowledge and accommodate female intellectuals be trusted to demonstrate equality?⁵⁸

What the ACJU demonstrated through their concerted attempt to stall MMDA reforms can be explained in several ways. First, their lack of awareness as to the developments with regards to Muslim women's participation in the labour force and, particularly, educated elite Muslim women's presence in the legal profession as well as in professional and academic sectors was apparent in their insistence on the limits of women's leadership.

The ACJU seemed to be wedded to a norm with regards to women's behaviour that was propagated by reformist groups with little understanding of how to accommodate the many women who negotiated those norms on a daily basis. For instance, the strict segregation of spaces as male and female was insisted upon by most reformist groups and generally practiced in Muslim social spaces across class and region. However, such segregation was not possible in public spaces or in common work contexts, that Muslims shared with others. In the normative context of legislation, the ACJU found itself unable to shift the norms to be in line with general practice. Their inability to compromise or find a solution in the scripture, as they did in the case of conflicts between the reformists and the Tarikas caused much distress and confusion. Furthermore, the spectacle of religious Muslim men 'oppressing' Muslim women was a favourite trope of the anti-Muslim movement and the ACJU, and their supporters were emblematic

⁵⁷ *Colombo Telegraph* 2017c.

⁵⁸ Farook 2017.

of this trope. Unfortunately and perhaps for good reason it was a position that Muslim women activists also amplified in their activism.

With the release of the split report the MMDA reform process stalled. In the aftermath of the Easter Bombings talk emerged again to expedite the reform, partly as a process of bringing the Muslim community in to line. As I have documented elsewhere,⁵⁹ the bombings were spun as entirely and solely being the fault of ‘extremism’ in the Muslim community, and as a direct consequence of reformist-led transformations. Muslims performance of religiosity was seen to be the problem, and there were calls to abolish the special status given to Muslims by way of the MMDA. *One country one law* was the slogan under which the MMDA was to be either reformed or done away with. Today, the current authoritarian government that profits from the demonisation of Muslims has stated that it will reform the MMDA, despite opposition from the ACJU.

Conclusion

The chapter has discussed three instances where the ACJU has attempted to provide leadership in the context of difficulties faced by the Sri Lankan Muslims who are a minority located in a tensely plural polity. The stories speak to the complexity of the circumstances Muslim communities in Sri Lanka are compelled to navigate. The Sri Lankan state’s long history of anti-minority politics – the emergence of an organised anti-Muslim movement in the war’s aftermath and, more recently, the Easter Sunday bombings of 2019 – impact Muslim lives in various ways. The Muslim leadership is compelled to negotiate these influences on a daily basis. This is in addition to the linguistic, regional, class, sectarian and political party divisions among the two million strong Muslim population. The ACJU gained strength from the reformist movement that has been active in Sri Lanka for decades, but became visible through transformations of dress and other everyday practices among Muslim communities since the 1980s. This period –coinciding with the ethnic war in Sri Lanka – led to reformist influence and the ascendance of the ACJU in keeping with reformist ideology. After the end of the war in 2009, Sinhala nationalist groups were in search of a new enemy whom they could scapegoat for the many ills afflicting the country in general and the Sinhala Buddhist population in particular. Sri Lanka’s Muslims, a minority, are being targeted, and specifically the changes embraced by

⁵⁹ See Haniffa 2019b.

Muslims as a result of reformism are now being discussed as leading to extremism. This chapter has argued that the ACJU is not capable of addressing the new challenges that the Muslims of Sri Lanka face, due to the following reasons. As a product of the reformist sensibility and ideology – as represented by the Tablighi Jamaat – the ACJU marginalised sections of the Muslim population that did not follow their line. In relation to reforms to the MMDA the ACJU – by adopting a position that is contrary to the requirements of most Muslims and a position that feeds anti-Muslim stereotypes – is proving itself to be lacking foresight in the current context. Additionally, as religiosity is the main target of the anti-Muslim movement the ACJU, as a religious organisation, is not tactically equipped to address the challenges they pose. Therefore, regardless of the fact that they are one of the few organised institutions among the Muslim population, their acceptance as community mediators is unfortunately dwindling.

The dwindling acceptance of the ACJU has been recognised by many within the Muslim community, and there are organised groups that are moving forward with an agenda tailored to meet the many challenges that are emerging. The strident Sinhala nationalism, laced with hatred of Muslims, has state support. Since March 2020, the government has prohibited burials of COVID dead, thereby severely distressing the Muslims. In addition, Sri Lanka faces an economic crisis with a looming balance of payments issue exacerbated by the pandemic. There is unrest throughout the country and militarisation is on the rise. Addressing the interests of Muslim communities in the midst of such challenges will be a task that will require great organisation and vision. It will need the ACJU, but it will also need the mobilisation of all of the intellectual resources that the Muslim political and civil society leadership can muster without being constrained by the perspective, working requirements, and limitations of a single organisation.

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Claude C. Kempen

“We Don’t Need to be Saved”

An Investigation of *My.Kali* Magazine and its Related LGBTQIA+ Community in Amman, Jordan

Abstract: This chapter investigates the positioning of Islam within the various debates and articles that appeared in the Jordanian LGBTQIA+ online magazine *My.Kali*. I will build on two statements taken from an interview with the magazine’s founder, Khalid Abdel Hadi, published by *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: “Religion is not the problem” and “We don’t need to be saved”. This text will then add other voices from the magazine to his perspective and embed them within broader discussions around being Muslim, queer, and Arab. This will touch on ways Muslims are embracing their religiosity at the same time as their queerness, as well as debunking the twin myths of the “Western queer paradise” and the “Muslim homophobe”. This also includes Muslim awareness of racism, Islamophobia, and heteronormativity in so-called Western countries. Juggling local and global activism, the concepts of queerness, histories, and languages makes visible the complex nature of Arab LGBTQIA+ communities.

Introduction

This chapter builds on two statements taken from a 2020 interview with Khalid Abdel Hadi, the founder of the Jordanian LGBTQIA+ online magazine *My.Kali*: “Religion is not the problem” and “We don’t need to be saved”.¹ These statements will serve as a frame to the wider discussions around being Muslim, queer, and Arab that are taking place at *My.Kali*. I will draw in particular on eight English-language² articles published in *My.Kali* between 2013 and 2020 that speak to Abdel Hadi’s interview. Some of them are based on personal

I would like to thank Hinemoana Baker for her support and much appreciated input on this chapter.

1 Abdel Hadi 2020, 2. Translated from German by Claude Kempen. The interview was originally conducted in English and translated into German for *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. The original quotes were requested but not received by the time of this chapter’s publication.

2 This chapter marks only the beginning of possible research around *My.Kali* magazine. Expanded research could take the Arabic articles into account as well.

LGBTQIA+ experiences or memories, others are (self-)critical of the magazine's work, and some discuss academic concepts such as Joseph Massad's "Gay International" or Jasbir K. Puar's "Homonationalism"³ – concepts which will be discussed at length below.



Fig. 1: *My.Kali* cover, featuring Rashed, no. 64 (Arabic version). With friendly permission by the editor: *My.Kali* 2018.

Further, I will investigate how some of these individuals are embracing their religiosity at the same time as their queerness, debunking the twin myths of the “Western queer paradise” and the “Muslim homophobe”. The chosen articles also demonstrate a heightened awareness of racism, Islamophobia, and hetero-

³ See, for example, Nasser-Eddin and Abou-Assab 2018, Shadeedi 2018 or Hanna 2019.

normativity in so-called⁴ Western countries. This juggling of local and global activism, the concepts of queerness, histories, and languages makes visible the complex nature of Arab LGBTQIA+ communities. The question of positionality is omnipresent in the articles: Who are we addressing? Who are we as a community? What knowledge do we draw on? How independent are we in making our own choices about the ways in which we are queer? I consider these questions inspirational and important for queers as well as non-queers, no matter their nationality or religiosity.

I have an uneasy feeling writing this chapter. As a *white*,⁵ Franco-German queer I am personally involved with the topic, while also wanting to disrupt academic writing practice about the 'Muslim Other' that has been constructed as the opposite to a 'Western Self' since the end of the first millennium.⁶ The crusades, the military confrontations with the Ottoman Empire, European Imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries, and the more recent events since 9/11 have been further used to reproduce these religious demarcations of 'Western-Christian' and 'Eastern-Islamic', marking one as 'good' and the other as 'bad'.⁷ The academic tradition of Orientalism has substantially contributed to this formation of the 'Other', as Edward Said has very poignantly shown in his 1978 book "Orientalism". Orientalism is the "discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery and practice".⁸ I powerfully believe in the need to interrupt this Orientalist tradition, while acknowledging that it has inevitably left its mark on me, as powerful hegemonies do. My aim in this chapter is not to talk over or overwrite existing activist voices, but rather to try and amplify their discourses in this academic context.⁹ In this way, I hope to give an additional platform to diverse ideas around being Muslim, Arab, and queer.

⁴ I am using "so-called" here to remind myself and the reader of the constructedness of geographical references. Not only do 'Western' and 'Eastern' limit our thinking to unnecessary and prejudiced binaries, they are also inaccurate and create only seemingly logical entities. For an interesting discussion on the naturalisation of the Middle East see Culcasi 2010.

⁵ When referring to a person, the term *white* is written in italics to deconstruct race as a natural category and to indicate the structural privileges that come with being *white*.

⁶ Attia 2009, 71.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Said 2003 [1978], 73. For further reading, see Amir-Moazami 2018.

⁹ Sarah Hamdan calls this practice "reconceptualizing agency and exposing colonialist/secular discourses in the Arab world (...) located primarily in a Western geopolitical context." Hamdan 2015, 69.

The *My.Kali* magazine is a bi-monthly online magazine founded in Amman in 2007 by then 17-year-old Khalid Abdel Hadi. Today, it has about 15,000 subscribers and 100,000 website visitors per month.¹⁰ It tackles topics of gender and its (non-)binarity, sexualities, politics, and pop culture.¹¹ Furthermore, it functions as an informant for policymakers, other activists, and media outlets.¹² The magazine promotes itself as an important platform for and from queers of the North African and West Asian region. Most users come from Algeria, Tunisia, and – before the war – Syria. In countries where the magazine is blocked, i.e. Qatar, Jordan, and Gaza, users can access the content via social media.¹³ The staff at *My.Kali* is also very aware of the fact that some subscribers and users need to read and receive the articles and pictures privately via mail, rather than being able to follow the magazine's activities on social media. Initially, English was the only language of the publication; this changed in 2015 when it was decided that Arabic should be added. The magazine has full-time employees, as well as guest writers, editors, stylists, photographers, and models. Most of them are locals with an Arab background, while the magazine is mostly open to international contributions if the content is deemed relevant to the main readership. They form a close and discreet network in the city of Amman, working hard to maintain safety around the places and offices where they meet. Many friendships have formed around the magazine.

Besides the underlying value of the reflections within the *My.Kali* community, there is more to discover. In the first section of the text which follows, I demonstrate that by engaging with the religious Islamic tradition, Muslim queers make religion their support system. In Abdel Hadi's words: "Religion is not the problem". This statement, and the wider work that *My.Kali* does, together disrupt 'Western' ideas that Islam is intolerant towards queerness, amplifying queer Muslim voices for those who need to hear them. In the second section, I will debunk the illusion of a 'Western' paradise that either serves as an example for queer Arabs and Muslims, or offers them refuge. Either way, religion and for the scope of this chapter Islam, is always part of their considerations, whether as part of a religious queering practice or through awareness of Islamophobia – the latter because in 'Western' countries, Islam is ascribed to them regardless of their religiosity and they are most likely be stigmatised for it.¹⁴

¹⁰ Abdel Hadi 2020, 1.

¹¹ Leach/*My.Kali* n.d.

¹² See, for example, Abdel Hadi 2017.

¹³ Abdel Hadi 2020, 4.

¹⁴ Kesinkilic 2019.



Fig. 2: *My.Kali* Cover, featuring Khalid Abdel Hadi, first *My.Kali* issue. With friendly permission by the editor: *My.Kali* 2007.

Islam is not the problem: Engaging religious tradition

Yes, there are many people here that have suffered from attacks coming from religious camps. We are being told, though, that Islam is the problem. Religion is not the problem, there are many gays that are believing Muslims and Christians.¹⁶

Abdel Hadi's words mark an important counter-argument to an essentialist and orientalist notion that Islam and those who believe in it are inherently homophobic. Jasbir K. Puar has very poignantly analysed the mechanisms of sexual

¹⁶ Abdel Hadi 2020, 2. Translated from German by Claude Kempen.

othering in her 2007 book “Terrorist Assemblages – Homonationalism in Queer Times”. She points out that because of the assumption that homosexuality is naturally secular “gay- and lesbian-identified Muslims (...) [become] inconceivable”.¹⁹ In ‘Western’ countries today, Islam thus seems to be identified as the opposite of homosexuality which becomes part of a “racializing technology” that marks Muslims as ‘Others’.²⁰ It should be noted at this point that Christianity is less likely than Islam to be seen as a contradiction to homosexuality or queerness, precisely because a certain secularity and enlightened character is attributed or granted to it.²¹ Islam, however, is thought of as a monolith, as the most homophobic religion of all, more homophobic than the “white mainstream queer communities are racist”.²² This leads to “a collective vilification of Muslims”.²³ Non-Muslim gays and queers are integrated into the *white* patriotic project, an ‘us vs them’, while also being constructed as victims of the homophobic ‘Muslim Other’.²⁴ In Puar’s analysis on the US, this in turn serves the nation state’s domestic and foreign interest, when the idea of gay rights is being used to legitimise war and military aggression.²⁵ Puar calls this dynamic ‘Homonationalism’,²⁶ a concept mainly developed with her analysis of the torture scandal of Abu Ghraib in 2003.

In support of deconstructing such an essentialised vision of Muslims, I would like to quote the Jordanian activist and writer Maher Al-Haj. He was interviewed in 2013 by the *My.Kali* reporter Julijan Rahaleh about his project “to educate and advocate on the permissibility of homosexuality within the Sharia Law of Islam in our Muslim and Arabic surroundings”.²⁷ Al-Haj felt there was no-one and nowhere he could turn to as he grew up questioning his sexuality. He describes his upbringing as “culturally conservative”,²⁸ rather than religious, and says he felt rejected by the people around him who deemed his “abnormal” sexual preferences disgusting. After many difficult years, he came to terms with himself: “I finally arrived to the only truth about my sexuality that matters: that homosexuality is a beautiful creation from Allah that needs to be respected,

¹⁹ Puar 2017 [2007], 93.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

²¹ Hall 1992, 277.

²² Puar 2017 [2007], 15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁵ Schotten 2016, 357.

²⁶ Puar 2017 [2007], 39.

²⁷ Al-Haj 2013, 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

protected, and celebrated."²⁹ Al-Haj himself felt religiously drawn to Islam, even more so than his average relative: "I felt an affinity to the religion Islam since a very young age. And as soon as I became aware of my sexual differences, I sought refuge, peace, and comfort in it."³⁰ He turned towards God, his religion, and found safety within, rather than without, religious practices. It is important to him to dismantle the idea that what he calls "traditional Islam" forbids homosexuality. In his opinion, homosexuality is part of God's intentions "that should be acknowledged and celebrated".³¹ He is aware of the existence of many homosexual, queer Muslims to whom Islam is very important and wishes to support them on their quest for self-acceptance and piety.

These kinds of possibilities and this adaptability in reading and interpreting the Qur'an are also demonstrated by what is known as the feminist or women's re-reading of the Qur'an, a movement associated with scholar-activists Amina Wadud, Margot Badran, and Asma Barlas, among others. Their goal has been to recover sexual equality within an Islamic paradigm by adding a women's perspective to what they think is an androcentric Qur'anic interpretation.³² They conceptualise theological premises that would suspend certain misogynist interpretations of the Qur'an. For example, thinking of God's unity, *tawhīd*, and exclusive divine sovereignty over humans, would rule out men's authority over women.³³ Furthermore, if God is understood as inherently good, incapable of doing bad, then bad things cannot be taught by God's speech.³⁴ These scholars also contextualise and historicise the Qur'an as a text of its time: Wadud distinguishes "universal and particular norms",³⁵ meaning that there are some verses that apply to seventh century Arab society, while others can be applied to today's circumstances. The universal meaning of verses must be hermeneutically filtered out. If the "original intention"³⁶ intended advances for women compared to the former status quo, the essence of this verse is progress.³⁷ We can identify a similarly fresh and daring new approach to interpreting the Qur'an regarding homosexuality in what Al-Haj says about God's nature and creative intentions: God is loving and wholesome which rules out a homophobic reading of religious sources.

²⁹ Al-Haj 2013, 2.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 4.

³² Afsaruddin 1999, 23.

³³ Barlas 2002, 13 and 106.

³⁴ Ibid., 14.

³⁵ Wadud 1999, xii.

³⁶ Shah 2006, 881.

³⁷ Ibid., 883.

The Liberal Islamic Association in Berlin (Liberal-Islamischer Bund e.V., LIB) has positioned itself in a similar way regarding the standing of homosexuality in Islam. To them, the individuality and independence of every believer outweighs unquestioned traditions and obedience towards authorities.³⁸ The key to their understanding of Islam is a person's relationship to God, a relationship that can only be expressed when their full individuality is respected and valued.³⁹ Similarly to Al-Haj, the LIB considers homosexuality as part of God's creativity and love of diversity; a diversity that should encourage us to get to know one another.⁴⁰ Historically, the LIB states, Islamic Law has proven its potential to re-evaluate rulings on sexuality and love, listing rape within marriage, sexual relationships between slaves and masters, and intercourse with minors as examples of outdated practices.⁴¹

In his book *Living Out Islam: Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims*, Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle contributes to the debate about the compatibility of Muslim piety and queerness. He states that the opinion of many Western observers, that "transgender, lesbian, and gay Muslims must leave Islam in order to live with dignity and pursue social reform",⁴² is wrong since "[m]any activists retain their loyalty to their religion, pursue deeper knowledge about it, and practice its rituals to the extent of their capacity. Others mine the Islamic tradition for resources for a progressive religious interpretation."⁴³ One such example that Kugle came across during his interviews and research with LGBTQIA+ Arab activists concerns Muslims' history as a formerly oppressed minority which was marginalised and vulnerable.⁴⁴ They remind their fellow Muslims that the Qur'an calls on protecting the "downtrodden", numbered among which are disabled, poor, and queer bodies.⁴⁵ "This is an example of activism in a mode that can be called 'engaging religious tradition'."⁴⁶

Engaging religious tradition as queers often means having to address the biblical and Qur'anic story of Lot that takes place in Sodom and Gomorrah (see the Qur'anic verses 7:80–84, 11:77–83, 15:58–77, 26:160–175, 27:54–58, 29:28–35, and 54:33–39). Contemporary scholars are divided when it comes to the

³⁸ Liberal-Islamischer Bund e.V. 2013, 1.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 3.

⁴² Kugle 2014, 53.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 54.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 22.

interpretation of these verses. Khalid Duran defends that the Qur'an "is very explicit in its condemnation of homosexuality, leaving scarcely any loophole for a theological accommodation of homosexuals in Islam".⁴⁷ Kugle, in contrast, sees no explicit discussion of homosexuality or homosexuals at all.⁴⁸ In order to promote a more inclusive reading of this Qur'anic segment, scholars and activists have interpreted the story of Lot as being about other issues than homoerotic acts.⁴⁹ The LIB assumes instead that it speaks of sexualised violence, assault and a lack of hospitality.⁵⁰ One of Kugle's interviewees

believes that the Qur'an does not directly address homosexuality. (...) It does speak about male assault and rape of other men in the story of the Prophet Lot (at Sodom and Gomorrah), but (...) does not address homosexuality as sexual orientation or homoerotic relationships as expressions of emotional commitment and care.⁵¹

Another voice out of Kugle's text, Omar Nahas – founder of the Islamic and educational Yoesuf Foundation – explains that in his understanding "the Qur'an condemns sodomy as the act of anal penetration rather than homosexuality as sexual orientation, while the Islamic legal tradition mistakenly conflates the two".⁵² This would mean that the "culturally specific social formations of same-sex desire as they are articulated in the West"⁵³ are considered foreign while the practice itself is not. It problematises homosexuality as a "'European identity category' which has been imposed by the West upon gays and lesbians of color".⁵⁴ By distinguishing practice from identity, the supposed universality of sexual identities is questioned. Whether that is helpful to sexually active gays is an unresolved question.

When it comes to engaging religious tradition, Ludovico Mohammed Zahed is a force to be reckoned with.⁵⁵ One of ten openly gay Imams worldwide, Zahed grew up in Algeria and France. In 2012, in Paris, he founded a mosque which welcomes people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Zahed holds a PhD in Anthropology and Psychology and advocates globally for a liberal interpretation of the Qur'an.⁵⁶ He approaches the Qur'an in similar ways to Kugle, his

⁴⁷ Duran 1993, 181.

⁴⁸ Kugle 2003, 219.

⁴⁹ For further information, see also Ali 2006, 82.

⁵⁰ Liberal-Islamischer Bund e.V. 2013, 1.

⁵¹ Kugle 2014, 31.

⁵² Ibid., 124.

⁵³ Fuss 1994, 33.

⁵⁴ Salti 1997, 27.

⁵⁵ Zahed 2016, 4.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 2.

interviewees, the LIB, and activist Maher Al-Haj. Zahed similarly interprets the story of Lot as being not about homosexual practices, but rather about rape: “In the Qur’an nothing is written of homosexuality being reprehensible.”⁵⁷ He goes on to describe that Muslims need to get to the core of the Qur’an’s spiritual essence, which he says is one of tolerance and peace, ruling out the kind of homophobia and marginalisation that comes about when Muslims blindly follow the sharia.⁵⁸ Besides the text-based disputes, an important place is of course given to the figure of Prophet Muhammad and his actions. Zahed tells the story of the prophet welcoming men into his house who were described as *mukhannath*, meaning effeminate, or feminine.⁵⁹ One of Kugle’s interview partners argues that we do not know of any incident “when the Prophet Muhammad punished any woman or man for homosexual orientation or same-sex acts”.⁶⁰

In this section, I have pointed out some of the strategies used by Muslim individuals to reconcile their religiosity with their homosexuality and queerness. Activist Muslims across Jordan, France, and Germany are engaging with religious sources to find refuge and acceptance within them. Alternative and new interpretations of the Qur’an, for example the story of Lot in Sodom and Gomorrah, are essential to this activism which in turn might remind us of related reinterpretation movements, such as the women’s rereading of the Qur’an. Believers are highlighting God’s generosity, acceptance, and love towards Muslims of all stripes. They point to this welcoming of diversity as part of God’s inherent intention to merge different identity affiliations. This questions the orientalist and racist notion of intrinsically homophobic Muslims and demonstrates the diversity of Islamic practice. In Zahed’s words: “We are Islam, we create our faith ourselves.”⁶¹

What paradise? We don’t need to be saved

Western media portrays LGBT-people from Muslim Middle East and North Africa as victims of their society. That they are tortured and longing for a life in the West aka Paradise. Oftentimes this is wrong. We don’t need to be saved.⁶²

⁵⁷ Zahed 2016, 3. Translated from German by Claude Kempen.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Kugle 2014, 32.

⁶¹ Zahed 2016, 2. Translated from German by Claude Kempen.

⁶² Abdel Hadi 2020, 2. Translated from German by Claude Kempen.

Puar's "racializing technology" of pre-supposed Muslim homophobia has a close relative, that is the notion that Muslims need to be saved from their homophobic environment, saved into the 'Western Paradise' where queers can find happiness, and where tolerance reigns.⁶³ Similarly to the *white* Western women's movement, "which had sought to universalise its issues through imposing its own colonial feminism (...) in non-Western countries",⁶⁴ the Western way of being gay becomes the inevitable and universal *modus operandi* that must be internationally imposed. Joseph Massad calls this missionary state of mind the "Gay International".⁶⁵ It includes transforming same-sex practice into an identity that comes with a set of rights and practices, such as coming out of the closet, being visible, and living life out and proud.⁶⁶ When it fails to see gayness performed the right way, the Gay International assumes heterosexuality. Gay identification as performed in these ways is seen as somehow more legitimately gay than same-sex practices and behaviours in and of themselves. Queer representation or 'outness' is considered the only way to achieve "social justice, equality, cohesion, diversity, multiculturalism, etc."⁶⁷ In his 2018 *My.Kali* article "Globalizing the Closet", Musa Shadeedi writes:

[T]he concept of the closet has become more than just a personal decision, or an individual process of discovering one's identity, but rather a standard according to which LGBTQI rights are measured in various cultures. It determines whether this culture is civilized, modern[,] or backward and intolerant of homosexuality.⁶⁸

He states that Western experiences have been framed as the only way to go, ignoring "other LGBTQIA+ communities, their choices, privacies, cultural contexts[,] and their right to choose",⁶⁹ while maintaining the notion of imprisoned, closeted, and tortured queers in the Middle East. There's only one solution: come out and leave the country.⁷⁰ At the same time, protection is only granted to

⁶³ Puar 2017 [2007], 43.

⁶⁴ Massad 2007, 161. I realise that Massad has been widely criticised for generalising and dichotomising (West/East, imported/authentic), for a good overview of this, see Hamdan 2015.

⁶⁵ Massad 2007, 161.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 162. For further reading about the introduction of normalised heterosexuality, see El-Rouayheb 2005; Tolino 2014; Najmabadi, 2005.

⁶⁷ Nasser-Eddin and Abou-Assab 2018, 2.

⁶⁸ Shadeedi 2018, 6.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

those who can perform and “demonstrate their gay-ness, either through appearances or using ‘western’ terminologies”⁷¹ while, in turn, being perceived

by their own communities as ‘westernised’, ‘traitors’, and ‘anti-nationalist’. This leads to even more discrimination against other non-normative people in their home countries [because] homosexuality and gay lifestyles [are] perceived as ‘western’ and related to imperialism.⁷²

That homosexuality was seen to be complicit with colonialism was also found by Ramzi Salti in 1997, this being a very

problematic assumption that has most notably led to the dual marginalization of the Arab homosexual by both the native (who now sees him as complicit with colonialism) and the colonizer (who still views him as a native and consequently as Other).⁷³

In the meantime, it is often forgotten that ‘Western’ countries are far from being safe havens for queers. In a twist that is as ironic as it is damaging, the very homophobia that was imported to the Middle East from ‘Western’ countries through imperialism is now cited when those countries are presented as the safe alternative – as the gay place-to-be.⁷⁴ In his 2008 book *Die Vertreibung aus dem Serail. Europa und die Heteronormalisierung der islamischen Welt*,⁷⁵ Georg Klauda argues that Western queer communities have forgotten about their own societies’ heteronormativity in the process of constructing Islam and traditionally Muslim countries as the cultural enemy.⁷⁶ Samer Owaida, a Chicago-based activist born in Palestine, attests to this in an interview with *My.Kali* in 2019:

It’s an illusion to think you’re completely free once you move here [to the West, and that] you will have a fantastic queer life, because of, for example, gay marriage. There is still a lot of violence against queer bodies in the USA, as seen in the high rate of homelessness among queer youth and murder [of] trans people.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Nasser-Eddin and Abou-Assab 2018, 4.

⁷² Ibid., 5.

⁷³ Salti 1997, 25.

⁷⁴ Massad 2007, 168.

⁷⁵ “The Expulsion from the Seraglio. Europe and the Heteronormalization of the Islamic World.” Translated from German by Claude Kempen. Klauda 2008.

⁷⁶ Klauda 2008, 132.

⁷⁷ Hanna 2019, 4.



Fig. 3: Digital *My.Kali* cover, featuring Juliana Yazbeck, no. 68. With friendly permission by the editor: *My.Kali* 2019.

The culturalisation of homophobia and the illusion of a Western queer safe space also conceal the racism that Muslim or Muslim-identified bodies endure in predominantly *white* countries. Amir Ashour, founder of IraQueer, was raised in Iraq and now lives in Sweden; he affirms that he struggles mostly because of the racism in Sweden.⁸² Bo Hanna, who interviewed Samer and Amir, is of Coptic-Egyptian descent living in the Netherlands. Hanna feels similarly excluded from both the Dutch LGBTQIA+ community, and his ethnic community: “I feel stigmatised within both and am constantly trying to balance in between them.”⁸³ Soumia Akachar has investigated the situation in the Netherlands further, noting that Muslim migrants are blamed for the increase in violence directed

⁸² Hanna 2019, 5.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 3.

against queers, which in turn has led to the problematisation of Islam and multiculturalism overall.⁸⁴ “Such understandings of sexuality and ethnicity tend to disregard the location of gay Dutch Muslims, embodying intersectional identities (e.g., ethnicity, religion, sexuality).”⁸⁵ Akachar stresses that an intersectional approach is essential to expose the various forms of oppression and erasure that this minority is affected by.⁸⁶

Many queers decide to stay in their home communities and search for local solutions precisely for the reasons mentioned above. They are aware of the consequences of moving to other countries where they will suffer from racialised stigmatisation and bemoaning the universalisation of queer identity that they experience as “cultural imperialism imposed by the ‘[W]est’ on the ‘[E]ast’”,⁸⁷ feeling that local histories are erased by foreign stories. As a means to move away from this hegemony and to open up spaces at home, some queers appeal to local homoerotic history, same-sex desires, and practices. Rather than universalising or projecting homoeroticism onto the past, they seek to “illustrate the sources of cultural capital”⁸⁸ to recover past knowledge in order “to understand the possibilities of alternative sexualities and social arrangements”.⁸⁹ Through the process of “mobilizing histories, reappropriating languages, and other cultural strategies, we may be able to gain affirmation and support”.⁹⁰ El Dob Al-Akbar’s 2018 article in *My.Kali* outlines his upbringing in a neighbourhood usually associated with violence and gangs. One might think, the article states, that such an area would be very conservative and condone only “‘legitimate’ sexual relations and the historic bilateral division of sexual orientation. But the truth is the exact opposite.”⁹¹ Al-Akbar tells us about the freedom he witnessed while growing up:

So, this article is about lost memories, or memories intentionally forgotten by our society that became lost in the state of denial. Memories that were lived by my generation and those who were born in the 1980’s too, those who dared to explore their sexual orientation and practices in the late 90’s.⁹²

84 Akachar 2015, 176.

85 Ibid., 177.

86 Akachar 2015, 175 and 183.

87 Nasser-Eddin and Abou-Assab 2018, 3.

88 Afzal 2015, 127.

89 Shah 1998, 486.

90 Ibid.

91 Al-Akbar 2018, 2.

92 Ibid.

Al-Akbar explains that relationships between young men were often more than platonic, often involving physical affection such as holding hands, hugging, kissing, or sitting on a friend's lap. He remembers that films with homosexual storylines were rare but not frowned upon. Of his friends, many had either fantasised about homosexual encounters or experienced them first-hand.⁹³ Hence, Al-Akbar goes back in time to remind us of lived sexual practices outside of imperialist ideas and identity categories. Similarly, Ahmed Afzal found that Pakistani Gay Men in Houston, Texas, are searching for "South Asian epistemologies of same-sex sexual eroticism"⁹⁴ as well as for "a religiously conceived transnationality, and appropriations of Western epistemologies of gay identity".⁹⁵

This search goes hand-in-hand with finding a language that disrupts what Sahar Amer calls the "almost exclusive reliance by Arab activists on Western terminology and Western paradigms of same-sex sexuality".⁹⁶ Amer objects to the language used by some Arab queer activists:

By adopting foreign terms and gender categories that mimic Western sexual politics and by dressing sexual preference in foreign linguistic garb, Arab gay activists unwittingly end up supporting a culture of shame that ultimately undermines Arab identity and leads to the further isolation of Arab gays and lesbians from their own socio-historical and literary traditions.⁹⁷

My.Kali magazine has been advocating for a local queer language since Arabic was introduced as a publication language alongside English in 2015. Abdel Hadi is overwhelmed by the response: "the readership of our Arabic content is three times the size of the English version."⁹⁸ Adding Arabic to the magazine was initially sparked by the accusation that *My.Kali* was serving a 'Western' agenda when the magazine's creators got involved with organising the International Day Against Homo- and Transphobia, mostly associated with US activism and a universalist mindset.⁹⁹ Abdel Hadi states that the language was an important symbolic move towards their people after that incident:

We gradually learned the importance of the language through which we communicate. We pursued an Arab identity in order to reach a wider base of readership. We realized that

⁹³ Al-Akbar 2018, 3.

⁹⁴ Afzal 2015, 124.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Amer 2012, 387.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Abdel Hadi 2020, 3. Translated from German by Claude Kempen.

⁹⁹ Al Shadeedi 2018, 3.

we had previously deprived our non-bilingual keen Arab readers from access to our contents, and, consequently, from communicating with us too.¹⁰⁰

In this section I have shown *My.Kali*'s intense engagement and related activism with 'Western' cultural imperialism around identity, sexuality, sexual expression, and lifestyle. The so-called 'West' does not stand as a queer paradise for all, but rather for 'white' bodies that participate in constructing Muslims as the intolerant enemy, consequently erasing LGBTQIA+ Muslims from our imaginations. Queer Arabs and Muslims that live in the West experience racism, Islamophobia, and exclusion from both the queer and their own communities. Many decide to remain in the countries where they grew up, sifting through religious sources, historical archives, and memories to find a language for their love, desires, and experiences. Whether they live in Jordan, the Netherlands or the US, they are navigating their lives at "the intersection of local socio-cultural vocabularies and the language of international gay rights activism".¹⁰¹

Conclusion: Agency, archives, and hyphens

My.Kali magazine gives an invaluable platform to Arab LGBTQIA+ voices and debates around so-called 'Western' forms or concepts of being queer or sexually non-normative vis-à-vis local and Arab ways of living those sexualities and sexual identities. Some articles question homonationalism, others reflect on being displaced as queer Arabs ("Neither Here Nor There"¹⁰²) as well as on the racism and Islamophobia outside their own communities. Further articles explore (homo)sexuality in Islam and local homoerotic histories and practices. Some Arab queers have come to terms with the fact that leaving their home countries will not give them the freedom that they imagine – 'Western' countries' rampant Islamophobia reads all Arab bodies as Muslim, no matter their level of religiosity (and their actual confession). Islam therefore becomes a factor considered when it comes to decisions of location and living situations as well as finding acceptance within the religious realm. Arab and Muslim queers are hence intersectionally affected by oppression and must work harder to create safer spaces for themselves, no matter which country they find themselves living in.

¹⁰⁰ Al Shadeedi 2018, 5.

¹⁰¹ Dennerlein 2017, 249.

¹⁰² Yazbeck 2020.

This creation of safer spaces is reflected in a very active search for solutions on the part of people that are in the *My.Kali* community as well as the other queer and Muslim voices discussed in this chapter. Activists are aware of the local and global tools that are available to them and put them to use, mining their own archives for inspiration.¹⁰³ Sometimes the magazine and its staff are criticised for being westernised, secularised, elitist, or tone deaf. This perhaps goes some way towards explaining why they are so inclined to discuss diverse approaches to living queer lives. In a (self-)critical article on their website, Al Shadeedi and Abdel Hadi interrogate themselves: "[W]ere *My.Kali*'s means of activism affected by The Gay International, and if so, how?"¹⁰⁴ and "[d]oes the Gay International really hurt those whom it seeks to liberate?"¹⁰⁵ In order to find an inclusive and locally sensitive tone *My.Kali*'s writers prove that several things can be true at the same time: the magazine can be published in both Arabic and English; queer history is local and global; and queer Jordanian history can be marked by cultural imperialism and colonialism as well as anti-imperialist activism and pre-colonial imaginings. These writers and activists can identify as LGBTQIA+ as well as "problematizing the way ['Western' categories] are being used and utilised to serve the agenda of cultural imperialists."¹⁰⁶

Their ways of engaging with global, local, Arab, and Muslim histories, languages, and forms of self-expression are intrinsically plural. Bettina Dennerlein has named it "the hybridity and interculturality of Arab LGBTQIA communities and identities"¹⁰⁷ and also – with reference to Sahar Amer – the "necessarily hyphenated character" of these communities.¹⁰⁸ This could remind us of Audre Lorde's "hyphenated people".¹⁰⁹ a term she used to describe the heritage and plural identity of Afro-Americans, which she later introduced to the Afro-German community during her Berlin years from 1984 to 1992. The diversification of identity and the idea of a "yes" rather than an "either or" is deeply ingrained in this hyphenation: Lorde herself is known as a "black lesbian feminist mother poet warrior".¹¹⁰ This hyphenated character in turn enables "an open

103 Sara Ahmed has worked extensively on feminist, anti-racist, and queer archives, see Ahmed 2010, 88–120.

104 Al Shadeedi 2018, 5.

105 Ibid., 2.

106 Nasser-Eddin and Abou-Assab 2018, 5.

107 Dennerlein 2017, 250.

108 Ibid., 251.

109 Opitz et al. 1992, viii and xiii.

110 Fembio 2020. Quite obviously, this idea of hyphenation and multiple oppression is closely related to the concept of intersectionality as described by bell hooks, and later by Kimberlé

assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure”.¹¹¹ Butler suggests here that identity is not an essence or a goal, but rather something we do or affiliations we accumulate. A close reading of *My.Kali* magazine reveals the fact that Muslim queers don’t need saving, and shows the ways in which they find refuge in religion. However, it also makes clear that activism which centres on identity categories “in essence beats the purpose of queerness, which is meant to disturb identities rather than reinforce them”.¹¹²



Fig. 4: Digital *My.Kali* cover, featuring Mehdi Bahmad, no. 72. With friendly permission by the editor: *My.Kali* 2021. At the time of writing, this was the most current issue.

Crenshaw, and also borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari’s becoming minority (*devenir minoritaire*). See Crenshaw 1989, hooks 2014 [1984], Hamdan 2015.

¹¹¹ Butler 1999 [1990], 22.

¹¹² Nasser-Eddin and Abou-Assab 2018, 2.

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Abdulkader Tayob

Representation and Ethics

The Making of the Islamic World from a Place of Exile

Abstract: I use Edward Said's metaphor of exile to identify an archive that offers an alternative discourse in the study of Islam. By drawing on Western and Muslim traditions, this archive occupies a place of exile that does more than constructing a representation of the Muslim world. Like Said's work, it continues the critique of Orientalism. In addition, it includes a deliberation on ethics that has generally eluded the dominant discourse on the making and unmaking of the Islamic World. I contrast this archive with a post-Orientalist discourse that sometimes takes a deconstructivist approach to Islam, and sometimes one that emphasizes agency. The use of agency draws attention to Muslim imbrication in the social, political, and religious fields, but fails to account for political and economic hegemonies. Such strategies side-step the continuing dominance of Western political power games in Muslim societies and states. I therefore turn to scholars in exile and propose that their interest in critique and ethics offers a different way of imagining the Islamic world. Their questions and concern offer a different perspective to 'post-Saidian' Islamic Studies.

Introduction

In his Reith Lectures, the late American-Palestinian writer Edward Said proposed that exile offers a metaphor for the intellectual to represent the Other. If Orientalism was a critique of representation, the lectures were pointing to an ethical place from which to take up the task of representation. The exile refuses to take up a home that invariably needs to be defended with ideology. For Said, exile provides a vantage point from which to represent the unequal relation of power in the social world.¹ Said distinguished the critique of the exile from the postmodernist critic, and remained hopeful for the academic and intellectual to make a difference. I use the metaphor of exile in this chapter to examine the work of intellectuals who offered an alternative set of questions to imagine the Islamic world. Drawing on Western and Muslim traditions, their work occupies

1 Said 1994.

a place of exile that does more than constructing a representation of the Muslim world. Like the work of Said, their work continued the critique of Orientalism. In addition, they include a deliberation on ethics in the study of Islam that may be seen in Said's lectures for the exiled intellectual.

The aim of this chapter is to present an outline of frameworks for the study of Islam that remain marginal to a dominant discourse. I begin with a critical reading of a recent post-Orientalist discourse on the study of Islam and Muslims, showing that this literature is aware of Said's critique of the way the Islamic world continues to be made in scholarship and public spheres. In response, it sometimes offers deconstruction and sometimes the agency of Muslim actors as alternative forms of representation. Both theoretical strategies generally downplay unequal power relations that permeate the contemporary political and economic map of the world. They particularly fail to bring into question the dominance of Western political power games, with or without the collusion of local actors. The use of agency turns attention to Muslim imbrication in the social, political, and religious fields, while political and economic hegemonies remain on the margins of analysis.

But these reflections point to another trajectory of representation that offers alternative ways of thinking about the Muslim world. In the second part of the chapter, I turn to intellectuals whose work may be seen as representations of exiles in the Saidian sense. These intellectuals challenge the representation of Islam in the key disciplines of Islamic Studies, offering ways of imagining Islam beyond the dominant frames of deconstruction and agency.

Post-Orientalist Islamic Studies

The impact of Said's thesis has been widespread in the academy and continues to be felt in publications, meetings, and presentations. I turn to two anthologies and the extensive work of Armando Salvatore, that have adopted Said's thesis on the problem of representation. They reveal a tendency to find an alternative way of representing the Muslim world, and an attraction to deconstruction. But they reveal what postcolonial scholar Mudimbe has called the hegemony of a Colonial/Western Library.² They struggle to find a vantage point beyond the dominant trends in Western scholarship in general, and its representation of the

² Mudimbe 1997.

other. Moreover, they tend to minimise global hegemonies that constitute the world and a scholarship that represents it.

In an edited volume dedicated to Bruce Lawrence, Carl Ernst and Richard Martin call their project ‘post-Orientalist’, drawing on critical insights developed in the social sciences since the publication of Said’s book. They specifically refer to new approaches in religion,³ tradition, violence, and identity. Most of the articles in the edited volume deconstruct terms and tropes used in the scholarly construction of Islam and the Muslim world. These include modern political narratives,⁴ Sufi biographies in the past and the present,⁵ modern Muslim subjects,⁶ and textual practices.⁷ This critical analysis stands side by side with Muslim contributions in the volume that address ethical dilemmas and challenges of Muslim political and religious subjects.⁸ In the study of religion, these might be dismissed as insider voices. They are included in the volume, but do not receive special comment or engagement.

In addition to critical theory, the volume addresses dichotomies created by Orientalist representations of Islam: Arabic and the Middle East in the centre, while other Muslim experiences are on the periphery; Islamic Studies set apart from Religious Studies; and an emphasis on the nation-state rather than global and regional connections.⁹ In another recent volume on the study of Islam, Buskens refers to another set of dichotomies that pervade the field: texts vs practices, classical vs modern, and centres and peripheries.¹⁰ Like the Martin and Ernst volume, this volume is also dedicated to crossing boundaries that have emerged within Western intellectual history in the study of Islam.¹¹ Both volumes recognise orientalist representations as normative dichotomies that appear to be objective and natural.

Buskens devotes a chapter that directly addresses Said’s thesis. While recognising the problem of how Islam has been represented, he tries to salvage some of the value of this colonial and 20th-century legacy. He corrects generalising assumptions made of Dutch pioneers in Islamic Studies and alludes to a Japanese Orientalism that may be compared with a Western Orientalism.

³ Asad 1986.

⁴ Ernst 2010.

⁵ Gilmartin 2010, Stewart 2010.

⁶ Ewing 2010, Martin and Barzegar 2010.

⁷ Reinhart 2010, Moosa 2010.

⁸ Safi 2010, Cornell 2010, Karim 2010; Kugle 2010.

⁹ Ernst and Martin 2010.

¹⁰ Buskens 2016a.

¹¹ Buskens and van Sandwijk 2016.

Buskens seems to tell the reader not to throw the Orientalist baby out with the bathwater. He believes that some methods may be salvaged from this tradition.¹² According to Buskens, one way of developing the study of Islam is to use culture as a more general concept rather than religion. Taking a different stance from the Martin and Ernst volume, Buskens wants to turn away from a dominant trope in popular Western discourse that represents Muslims as essentially religious.¹³

With this general view of the field in these edited volumes, I would like to look more closely at the work of Armando Salvatore who has produced a library on the challenge posed by Edward Said. He, too, readily admits the problem of representation that is hegemonic by definition.¹⁴ But Salvatore believes that the project of representing Muslims can be salvaged by finding a common thread in the history of Islam and the West. Not tempted by deconstruction to give up the representation of Islam, his work exemplifies an emphasis on Muslim agency while unfortunately downplaying the impact of colonial conquests and post-colonial struggles in this construction.

Salvatore has analysed many different ways of thinking about Orientalism and the representation of Islam. In his earliest work, he argued that the political discourse of modernity among Arab intellectuals followed a similar course set in Europe. After reviewing the emergence of a discourse on religion in Europe, Salvatore identifies a similar construction on the opposite shore of the Mediterranean Sea. "The genesis of an intellectual function and the emergence of a public sphere", he says of the Middle East during the last quarter of the 19th century was crucial to "examine the Arab-Islamic path to modernity".¹⁵ This Islamic modernity was created in the new public spheres made possible by colonial conquests. In this analysis, Salvatore does not ignore the colonial context but does not include it in his analysis of an Islamic modernity.

In his next project, Salvatore went beyond the construction of a modern Islamic discourse. While his 1997 book placed Europe in the lead, he later searched for an earlier historical vantage point from which Islam and the West may be compared with each other. This time, his conceptualisation of the public sphere does not start with the emergence of European modernity, but with the Axial-Age first identified by Karl Jaspers. This period was considered a major global change for

¹² Buskens 2016b, 253; 259.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁴ Salvatore 1996.

¹⁵ Salvatore 1997, 41.

locating and explaining, in historical-comparative, sociological terms, the type of breakthrough that allowed, through the shaping of notions of transcendence, for the emergence of a type of human reflexivity conventionally identified as the passage from the narrativity of *mythos* to the rationality of *logos*.¹⁶

Recalling a 19th-century thesis of the evolution of religion, Salvatore argued that religion as transcendence placed Islam alongside the West. He uses this common ground to focus on “the rationality of *logos*” that promotes inter-subjective reflexivity. From the perspective of the Axial Age, Islam and the West were two distinctive instances of a major transformation in human social organisation and consciousness.¹⁷ In fact, Islam as a civilisation predated the later Western manifestation of the Axial Age. Through this analytical move, Salvatore re-ordered the framework for thinking about modernity, and pointed to a convergence between Islam and the West. Salvatore identified institutions and values of Islamic civilisation that were very similar to the modern West. Thus, Salvatore found in Islam civilising processes that promoted personhood, civility, religious scholars, and non-religious intellectuals.¹⁸ This framework represented Islam as a modern civilisation very similar to the West.

By shifting the focus away from the modern period, Salvatore provided a long-term perspective on the relation between religion and civilisation. By broadening the definition of religion from its construction in the modern West, as shown in his earlier work, Salvatore now offered a different perspective on the temporality of modernity. Doing so, he rejected a dominant Orientalist view that Islam was unable to modernise. He admits that his approach represents a minority tradition in the sociology of religion, but argued that it offers a corrective to an Orientalist representation that focuses only on the West.¹⁹

And yet, Salvatore’s sociological perspective is led by insights from the intellectual archive of Western modernity. The convergence between Islam and the West was always constructed in the image of the West. The choice of terms and social processes followed Weber’s thesis, fine-tuned by Weberian scholars. While Salvatore claims convergence, his analysis marked Western civilisation in the lead, with the experience of Islam following a close or parallel trajectory. In his work, one hardly finds any reference to theorisation in Muslim intellectual discourse, in the past or the present, without first finding it in Western social

¹⁶ Salvatore 2007, 51–2.

¹⁷ Salvatore 2007.

¹⁸ Salvatore 2013, Salvatore 2016, Salvatore 2009.

¹⁹ Salvatore, 2016, 1.

theory. One hardly finds any other concept worthy of note in Islamic civilisation that is not in the West.

More significantly, Salvatore side steps the power and hegemony of the new Axial civilisation represented by Western modernity. His model regularly refers to the hegemonic power of the West that has transformed the rest of the world through politics, economics, and values. But he hardly brings this hegemony and its effects on the Muslim formulation of social life from the 18th to the 21st centuries into his analysis. He is keen on showing that whilst Europe was emerging as a powerful global actor, Muslim actors were agents in their own right. Salvatore, however, ignores the military responses put up by Muslims in this period, and places emphasis on organic intellectuals who responded with modern ideas. Salvatore is consistent in rejecting Orientalist tropes of Muslims as stuck in an unchanging tradition.²⁰ But his model says little about features of Western modernity through which Islamic civilisation lost power. The critique of Orientalism as power and hegemony that creates the world in its image, as argued by Said, is downplayed until it disappears completely.

Scholars of Islam, then, have risen to the Saidian challenge of representation and its hegemony. The pitfalls of representation are now generally acknowledged, and attempts made to address its negative effects in the public sphere and in academia. In post-Saidian Islamic studies, critical theory is used to unmask representations that create regimes of knowledge, identities, and subjects. Side by side with a deconstructive stance, agency seems to provide relief to social theorists. It is readily embraced in critical theory that argues that the agency of the dominated should and cannot be ignored. Against dominant structures of power led by political, cultural, and economic hegemonies, individuals formulate resistances or alternative cultural worlds and outlooks.²¹ In post-Saidian Islamic Studies, however, this focus on agency is accompanied by under-theorising hegemony. As I have shown in Salvatore by way of example, the agency of the Muslim is elevated to such an extent that the effect of old and new hegemonies is left under-theorised. The emphasis on agency provides a rather feeble analytical response to global hegemony in the past and present.

But there is another problem posed by agency in the presence and role of insider intellectuals and academics in the representation of the Islamic World. A post-Orientalist study of Islam struggles to conceptualise the agency of insider intellectuals and academics. The latter are represented in the edited anthologies, but their work stands apart from post-Orientalist reflections that I have

²⁰ Salvatore 2016.

²¹ Power 1999, de Certeau 1984, Brubaker 1985, Fulton 1987.

identified. This problem may have deeper roots in the role of the social scientist who, according to Paul Rabinow, is said in theory “to refuse all social action, all interest in the meaning and/or stakes of social life”.²² But from an exilic perspective, this disinterest cannot be sustained. And so I turn to a different archive in the representation of Islam from that vantage point.

Islamic Studies from a place of exile

In this second part of the chapter, I want to turn to Said’s metaphor of exile from which a different representation of Islam may be identified. There are two broad lines of inquiry in this tradition. The first is a continuing critical reflection of the study of Islam as representation, exemplified in the work of Talal Asad, Mohamed Arkoun, and Shahab Ahmed. Another line of inquiry is constituted by a much larger group that extends beyond the Western academy, but I will focus on the work of Isma‘il al-Faruqi (d. 1986) and Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) to appreciate the significance of ethics that they bring to the representation of Islam. In the following, I present short vignettes of these scholars’ work with a particular emphasis on their critical reflections on representation in their respective fields, and their suggestions for an alternative framework. I will also attempt to show either an explicit connection among the various protagonists or bring out an implicit one. My purpose in this chapter is to point to an archive that is animated by these intellectuals through a different set of questions than those driven by representation, agency, and critical deconstruction.

Mohammed Arkoun, Talal Asad, and Shahab Ahmed have made critical interventions in the study of Islam in their respective fields. Asad offers a discursive approach in place of representation for anthropology, while Arkoun challenges Islamic Studies to take seriously the intellectual history of Islam and new insights from the social sciences. In his posthumously published book, Ahmed offered a tour de force that challenged representations of Islam in multiple modern disciplines.

Asad argued that the Islam discovered by scholars like Wilfred C. Smith, Clifford Geertz, and Ernest Gellner was theoretically problematic from a post-colonial perspective. In particular, Islam as a faith, symbolic system or worldview did not allow for debate and deliberation. Asad’s criticism of Gellner captures this tendency in the field: “Islamic actors do not speak, they do not

22 Rabinow 1996, 149.

think, they behave”.²³ And the academic observer identified an essence and function of Islam from this behaviour through carefully chosen *dramatis personae*. Asad’s use of theatre aptly represents the gaze that works in the service of representation. Moreover, Asad argues that these representations were created from unquestioned theoretical assumptions and political movements, first developed or identified in the West, and then applied to Muslim contexts.

As an alternative, Asad offered Islam and religion generally as discursive traditions “that connect [sic] variously with the formation of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it), and the production of appropriate knowledges”.²⁴ Asad brings important insights of Wittgenstein, McIntyre, and Foucault to the discourse of Islam. With discourse, he offers another way of thinking of religion as disciplinary and disciplined practices. Asad’s formulation of religion as a discourse has been used extensively in the anthropology of Islam to recognise the formation of Muslim subjectivities. These subjectivities have generally focused on religious movements on the politics of the self. Whilst drawing on the later Foucault, they have rejected the dominant assumptions of subject formation rooted in European philosophy and public spheres.²⁵

There have been criticisms levelled against these studies for emphasising only the religious aspect of Muslim societies. It is argued that Muslims are also determined by class, nation, leisure, and a deep ambiguity in their devotion to religion. The ‘Asadian’ tradition in the anthropology of Islam, it is claimed, has confirmed an Orientalist trope that Muslims are essentially religious.²⁶ This critique is mainly addressed at continuing Orientalist tropes that dominate a Western public imagination of Muslims. Scholars of Islam in the West are confronted by generalisations of Islam and Muslims in often hostile Western public spheres. One of those generalisations is that Muslims are completely determined by religion. Scholars of Islam are at pains to show that not all Muslims are religious. But this corrective does not address the nature of a religious discourse and how it is used by Asadian scholars. Moreover, it has not displayed any sensitivity to how these social and political terms are translated from the experience of the centre to the periphery, as Asad cautioned in his inaugural lecture.

And yet, the Asadian tradition applied in Western anthropology has not been able to address the nature of Muslim discourse in its complexity, and its

²³ Asad 1986, 8.

²⁴ Ibid., 7.

²⁵ Mahmood 2005, Hirschkind 2006, Hirschkind 2001, Mahmood 2006, Mahmood 2001.

²⁶ Bangstad 2009, Schielke 2010.

longer spatial and temporal elaboration. And this is what Mohamed Arkoun addresses to the temporal limitation of the anthropological gaze. Arkoun has not been as extensively appreciated and debated in Western academia as Talal Asad, but he has made a significant impact in the Muslim world. Many of his books have been translated into Arabic and became part of a renewed critical interest in the heritage (*turāth*).²⁷ Arkoun appealed to scholars in Islamic Studies (*Islamwissenschaft*) not to ignore critical social science theories. He asked them to give up the positivist legacy inherited from the 19th century. Emphasising what he calls “emergent reason”²⁸ as a heuristic tool, he asked scholars to examine the epistemic regimes created in the past and the present:

Removed from a strictly theological perspective, religion is studied in its historical, sociological, and anthropological context, thereby setting the stage for a theory of religion as a socio-historic, universal phenomenon. In this perspective, Islam is but one example among others that can be studied via the social sciences as part of a global theory of knowledge.²⁹

‘Emergent reason’ is to be differentiated from scientific positivism and religious reasoning. Addressing himself to scholars of religion, Arkoun hopes that emergent reason will “cultivate the humility of the saints and sages, the generosity of the greatest witnesses of the spiritual life, and the philosophical disquiet of the most fertile thinkers”.³⁰

Arkoun’s goal of “a global theory of knowledge”³¹ points to the value of studying Islam as part of studying religions in truly comparative ways. According to Arkoun, a universal approach to the study of religions will offer a more insightful and valid study of religious experience *and* its total history. Arkoun strived to point out that this modern discipline has barely absorbed Islamic intellectual history. Even perceptive scholars like Paul Ricoeur are guilty of this neglect.³² The intellectual history of Islam, he argues, offers a set of concepts and terms that may be supplemented to the existing canon in religious studies. For example, Arkoun has gone to great lengths to suggest that terms like ‘authority’, ‘person’, ‘reform’, ‘revelation’, and ‘people’ are subject to critical analysis. Some of the terms match those encountered in the study of religions, but

²⁷ Tayob 2004.

²⁸ Arkoun 1998, 124.

²⁹ Arkoun 1995.

³⁰ Arkoun 1998, 150.

³¹ Arkoun 1995, 338.

³² Arkoun 1998, 140–41.

others point to very different modalities and questions that may supplement existing theories.³³

Against “a strictly theological perspective”, Arkoun prefers a self-reflexive secular analysis. The application of “emergent reason” includes a critique of modern secular regimes and ideologies in the West and in Muslim countries. According to Arkoun, secularism had become an ideological blindness that matches religious blindness. It, too, needs to be subjected to critical review: “from the point of view adopted in this essay, secularism, *as a source and domain of intellectual freedom* [emphasis added] to initiate a new theory and practice of authority, must also be undertaken in Western societies today”.³⁴ Arkoun suggests enlightened secular thinking against positivistic or religious intellectual regimes. His criticism is levelled at premodern and modern regimes of truth which obscure and render unthought and unthinkable key issues in society and in intellectual traditions.³⁵

Asad and Arkoun offered different reflections on how Islam has been (mis)represented. Using critical theory, they suggested that paying close attention to discourse pays attention to how religious worlds are created and to what effect. They have pointed to the pitfalls and limitations of representations driven by culture and religion that are limited to a European experience and theorisation. We can better appreciate this critical discourse by considering the widely-read book of Shahab Ahmed as part of this trajectory.³⁸ Ahmed’s book builds on this scholarly discourse that questions Orientalist representations, but one that offers an alternative.

The distinctive merit of Ahmad’s book lies in his review of the major epistemological trajectories of the representation of Islam in the academy. More specifically, he has shown how the search for an essence of Islam has pervaded modern disciplines. He begins with the classical Orientalist tradition criticised by Said, which Ahmad shows has defined Islam as law or politics.³⁹ This demarcation of a distinctive practice or disposition was locating an essence in the historical trajectory of Islam. It was a way of separating the essential from that which was extraneous and derivative. In contrast to law or politics, Sufism and philosophy were thus considered non-essential to Islam. Ahmed next turns to scholars of religion who focus on Islam’s essence around the Qur’an and Had-

³³ Arkoun 1988, Arkoun 1992, Arkoun 2002.

³⁴ Arkoun 1988, 72.

³⁵ Arkoun 2002.

³⁸ Ahmed 2017.

³⁹ Ibid., chapter 2.

ith, captured around piety or devotion.⁴⁰ Again, the essence of Islam is guided by the authors' assumptions of the religious. Ahmed follows this by a close analysis of culture in the anthropology of Islam. Here, he also finds an implicit prescription of what Islam ought to be in its essence (Chapter 4). In this review, Ahmad showed the long shadow of a major preoccupation that dominated the study of Islam. This preoccupation of finding an essence was introduced in the study of religions in the 19th and 20th century until it was displaced by a critical deconstructive turn.⁴¹ Ahmad's critical review of the study of Islam in various disciplines shows how the study of Islam was following this trajectory. Each discipline, from Orientalist philology to anthropology, looked for and found a different essence in Islam.

Following this critique, Ahmed dedicates two chapters to an alternative representation of Islam. He focuses on what Muslims between the Balkans and Bengal have done with texts as hermeneutic gestures. Drawing on a vast resource of religious texts, philosophy, mysticism, and poetry, he presents strategies of reading among Muslims that were not led by essence and function but by complexity and ambiguity. His conclusion is that Islam has been deeply engaged in a hermeneutic that thrives on ambiguity, contradiction and complexity: "[S]omething is Islamic to the extent that it is made meaningful in terms of hermeneutical engagement with Revelation to Muḥammad as one or more of Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text".⁴²

Asad, Arkoun and Ahmad represent a form of questioning that has extended the critique of Said in *Orientalism*. Working across various disciplines engaged in the study of Islam, they offer alternatives to the major concepts of religion and culture that emerged in the 19th century in the academy. They have also shown how these frameworks dominate the academy in spite of strong deconstructive trends. Asad shows the uncritical application of theory from a Western gaze, Arkoun points to a blindness to key terms in the history of Islam, while Ahmad points to a hegemonic search for essence. But they go beyond critiques by offering alternative way of representing Islam. Asad offers discursive theory to include deliberation and debate among Muslims, Arkoun points to the intellectual history of Islam for conceptual tools, while Ahmad points us to unpredictable hermeneutical practices that have dominated Muslim discourse for a long time. It is possible to discern or invent a conversation between the three proposals. Arkoun appeals to a discourse of Islam like Asad, and ex-

⁴⁰ Ahmed 2017, chapter 3.

⁴¹ Capps 1995, Murphy 2014.

⁴² Ahmed 2017, 405.

tends it into the history of Islam, but does not reject the insights to be gained from modern critical social sciences. Ahmad introduces a more complex hermeneutic to the discourse of Islam than that offered by Asad, one derived from the practices of poets, mystics, and philosophers.

There is another group of scholars that have been deeply engaged in this alternative trajectory. They are a much larger group of Muslim intellectuals in Western academies that have also been engaged with Orientalist and post-Orientalist scholarship. But in their concern for and engagement with political and social developments outside the West, they have promoted different strategies for studying Islam. Space does not permit me to outline in detail the range of scholarship that has engaged with diverse theories – from Kant to feminist ethics – that constitutes this line of inquiry. But what is clear is that the main question guiding this trajectory is not limited to representation, but moral and ethical questions that guide Muslim societies. Such work includes a representation of Islam, but its main preoccupation is an ethical dimension that one hardly finds in post-Saidian Islamic Studies.

Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi (d. 1986) and Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) lay the ground for two very different kinds of ethical frameworks for the study of Islam and the Muslim world. Al-Faruqi was professor of Islamic Studies at the Department of Religion, Temple University, while Rahman was professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Chicago. Al-Faruqi developed a framework for the study of religions rooted in ethical values. In the 1960s, when the study of religion emphasised the essence of religion as the experience of the numinous, al-Faruqi argued that this preoccupation betrayed a modern, Protestant, and Romantic bias.⁴³ In place of experience, al-Faruqi proposed that values should lead the study of religious manifestations:

[T]he civilization as such becomes both a structured whole of meanings and a whole with a meaning. Every religious datum, whether it is an expression of an idea, an attitude or feeling-state, refers to something that is the content expressed, the meaning intuited or felt, the purpose realized or violated, or the object of inaction if no action whatever has taken place other than inaction. This something is a value.⁴⁴

According to al-Faruqi, the study of religions should be focussed on values expressed in its institutions, histories and practices. Moreover, these values constituted a meta-religion which was manifested in the religious history of

⁴³ al-Faruqi 1965a, al-Faruqi 1965b.

⁴⁴ al-Faruqi 1986, 419.

humankind.⁴⁵ But he believed that not all religious manifestations produced the highest or most desirable values for human societies. Religions, as reflections of a meta-religion, should also be approached with critical evaluation. Al-Faruqi's framework was closely related to the search for natural religion that inspired the study of religions since Kant. Like Kant, he was interested in the values that informed and shaped religious life, rather than experience as its *sine qua non*, as developed by Schleiermacher and those who followed him.⁴⁶ In al-Faruqi's view, experience was fundamentally inaccessible to the scholar who could only study what was available for testing and theory-making. He chose to study values.

With this framework, al-Faruqi proposed that the world of Islam after colonialism was rediscovering the values of meta-religion that it had lost. Islam, he continued, had expressed this meta-religion in the past and had the capacity to rediscover it. He studied various trends in Islamic history as approximations or claims to meta-religion. These claims ought to be studied, but also critiqued on ethical grounds. Using values and ethics for a theory of religion, al-Faruqi proposed a distinctive representation of Islam in the modern world. It was not a world trying to catch up with modernity, or one following a different path of modernity.⁴⁷ In his view, the Muslim world was rediscovering the values of meta-religion. Critics have pointed to the bias in al-Faruqi's analysis of religions and of Islam, but they have ignored his alternative recommendation for the study of Islam and of religions.⁴⁸ They have also generally ignored the pivotal role played in his critique of religious studies before it became fashionable to do so.

Al-Faruqi debated with another scholar who has left an equally important legacy of ethics for the study of the Muslim world. Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) was forced to leave his native Pakistan when he proposed changes in Islamic law for the new post-colonial state.⁴⁹ He went on to the University of Chicago where he refined and articulated a model for the study of Islam and Muslim societies for a new generation of intellectuals. Rahman began his work in Islamic philosophy where he demonstrated how Muslim philosophical thinking had made a significant impact on theologians in spite of their opposition to Greek ideas and cate-

⁴⁵ al-Faruqi 1986.

⁴⁶ Capps 1995, Schleiermacher and Crouter 1996.

⁴⁷ al-Faruqi 1967.

⁴⁸ Tayob 2013, Ghamari-Tabrizi 2004, Ford 1993.

⁴⁹ Rahman 1976.

gories.⁵⁰ It is this contextual insight that sets him apart from al-Faruqi. Rahman saw history as “contextual ethics [which] engages transcendent revelation in order to create a new consciousness and new values for the emerging age”.⁵¹ Change and variety were undeniable in history as he had shown in Muslim theological work, but the task of the scholar was to recognise and promote some fundamental values. Rahman proposed that such a set of core values may be found in a reading of the Qur’an:⁵²

Qur’anic legislation in the field of private and public life, even the ‘five pillars’ of Islam that are held to be religion par excellence, has social justice and the building of an egalitarian community as its end.⁵³

In the history of Islam, according to Rahman, such values had often been betrayed. In the development of Islamic law, for example, a stable framework for deducing values was developed by the great jurist al-Shafi’i (d. 820) and accepted by subsequent generations. In service to stability and tradition, however, the new framework lost the central value of justice.⁵⁴

Rahman believed that the study of values in society demanded a double hermeneutical analysis. The first was an analysis of Islam exemplified through a reading of the Qur’an from which its values could be identified, while the second was an analysis of new historical conditions that demanded a response on the basis of such values. In each case, Rahman’s vision demanded a representation of a Muslim condition. But in each case, that representation was guided by ethical critique.

Rahman’s approach to the discovery and promotion of values in different contexts has inspired a large number of modern scholars addressing challenges in the sphere of gender, human rights, and economic development.⁵⁵ In particular, scholars working on human rights for marginalised groups in the Muslim world have further developed his framework as an alternative to those who claim that Islam is inherently traditional, patriarchal or unable to incorporate modern values. In each, the representation of Islam is explicitly placed against a set of desirable values. In contrast to Orientalist and post-Orientalist values of

⁵⁰ Rahman 1958.

⁵¹ Moosa 2000, 21.

⁵² Rahman 1980.

⁵³ Rahman 1982, 19.

⁵⁴ Rahman 1965.

⁵⁵ Wadud-Muhsin 1992, al-Na’im 1990, Filali-Ansary 2003.

modernity and deconstruction, these representations critically reconstruct values in the history of Islam and in the contemporary world.

Conclusion

This chapter has pursued two interlinked goals. Firstly, it has critically examined post-Saidian reflections for the study of Islam. Recognising the pervasive power of the Orientalist gaze and academic disciplinary apparatus, these reflections show a desire to escape dominant Orientalist tropes and assumptions that pervade Western societies and its academy. Secondly, this chapter has pointed to a discourse of Islamic Studies pursued by insider exiles that are often acknowledged, but hardly incorporated and appreciated into dominant reflections in the Western academy. Using two aspects of Said's oeuvre, the fact of Orientalism and the place of exile, this chapter has shown that this discourse deserves to be appreciated for a different perspective on the representation of Islam and the Muslim world.

Post-Saidian scholarship was critical of the dominant representation of Islam in the Western academy and in Western public spheres. And various attempts have been made to overcome the legacy of Orientalism. The results, though, have been mixed. The representation of Islam, regarded as a modernist project, has been replaced by deconstructive critique and the agency of Muslims. The study of Islam remains locked in an interminable battle to build and break down frameworks. Moreover, alternative representations are rooted in theories of agency that fail to take seriously the continuing hegemonies that dominate the Muslim world. And potentially insightful attempts to build alternative representations remain Western-centric. One Western model (deconstruction) replaces another (Orientalism), or the West and its political and theoretical experiences lead the academic discourse. The colonial library has not been seriously challenged.

But this chapter is not limited to critique. Its second goal has pointed to another archive that has emerged from the work of scholars in exile. Those whom I have identified have been part of the modern academy, but their work has gone beyond deconstruction. Two lines of inquiry may be identified. The first has continued the work of Said, pointing to the pervasiveness of Orientalism in the Study of Islam. It has offered important insights on overcoming Orientalism and offered constructive suggestions on doing Islamic Studies after Said. These scholars suggest discourse as a trajectory but offer different understandings and insights into what discourse means for the study of Islam. Another line of in-

quiry has introduced ethical questions in the field. This line of inquiry has focussed attention on values that constitutes the Muslim world. I have pointed to two overlapping frameworks from Al Fārūqī and Rahman. This second line of inquiry has challenged a dominant stance in the modern academy that claims an objective, outside perspective for the researcher against an insider position of commitment and belief. In this dominant view, the insider can never be as objective as the outsider. Contrary to such fears, this chapter has shown how scholarship in exile has brought important questions to the study of Islam. It has shown how disciplinary critique and ethical reflections offer alternative questions and futures.

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